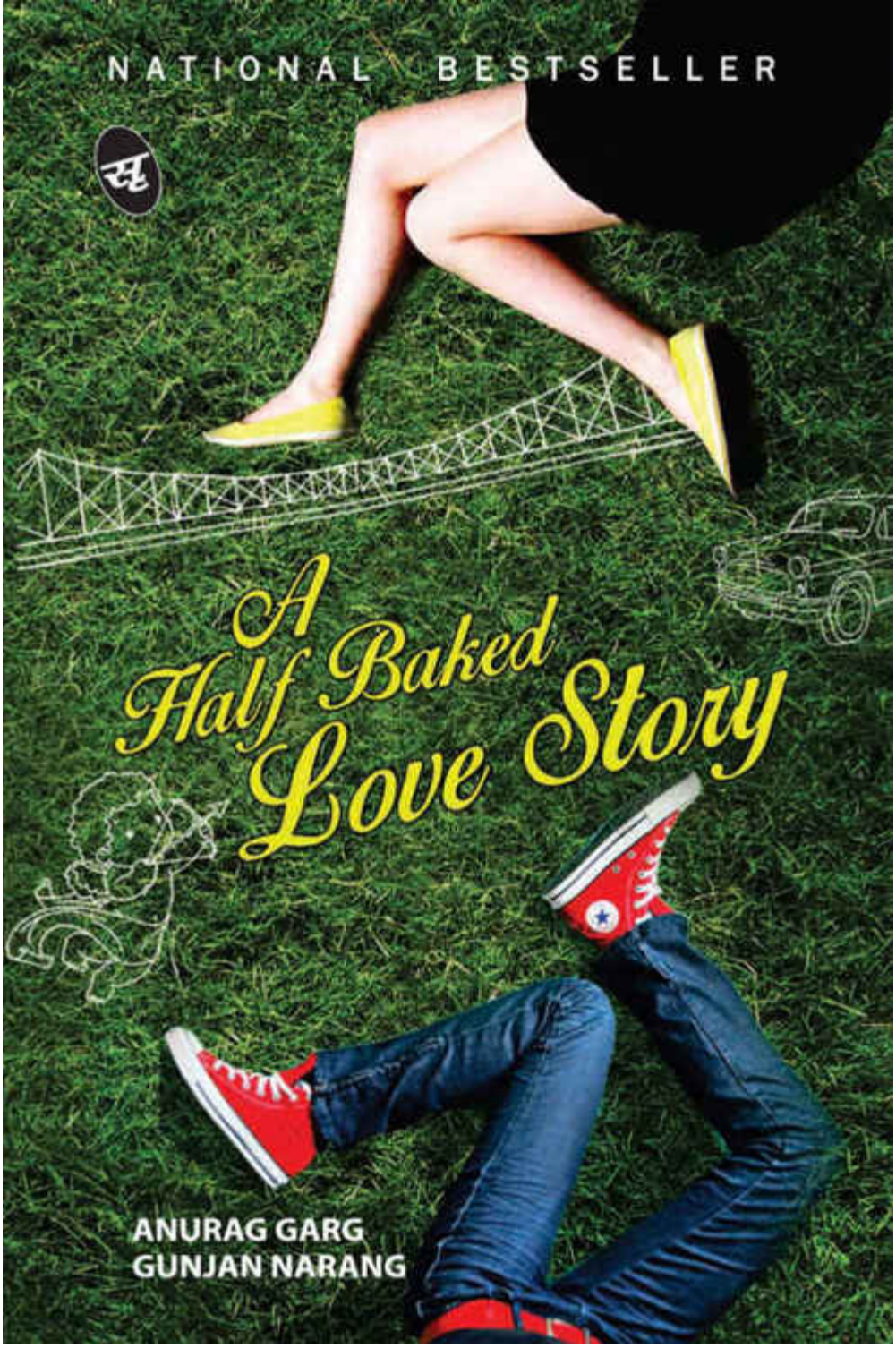
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A Half Baked Love Story
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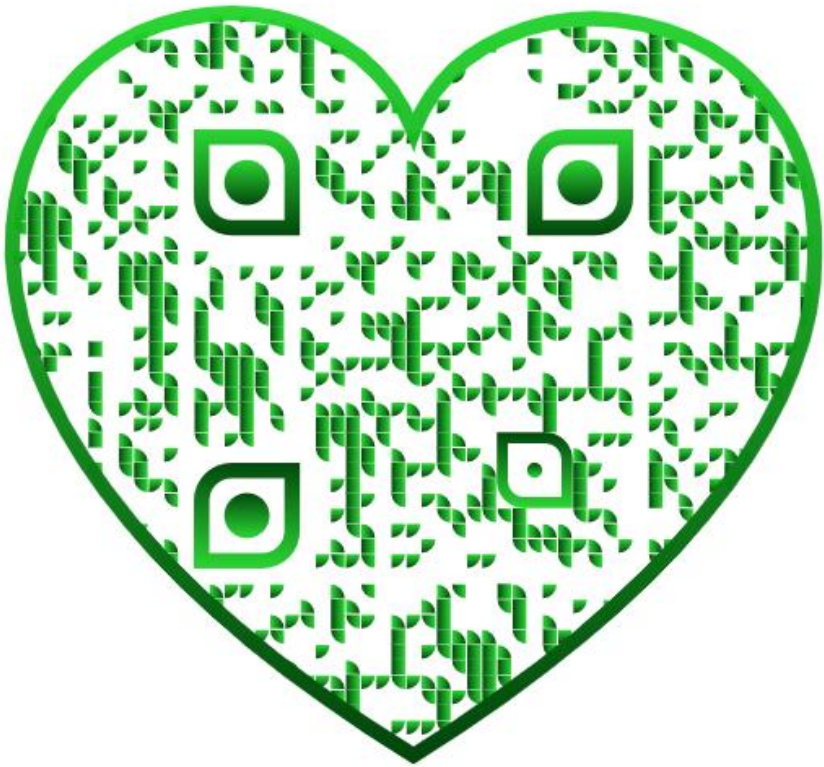

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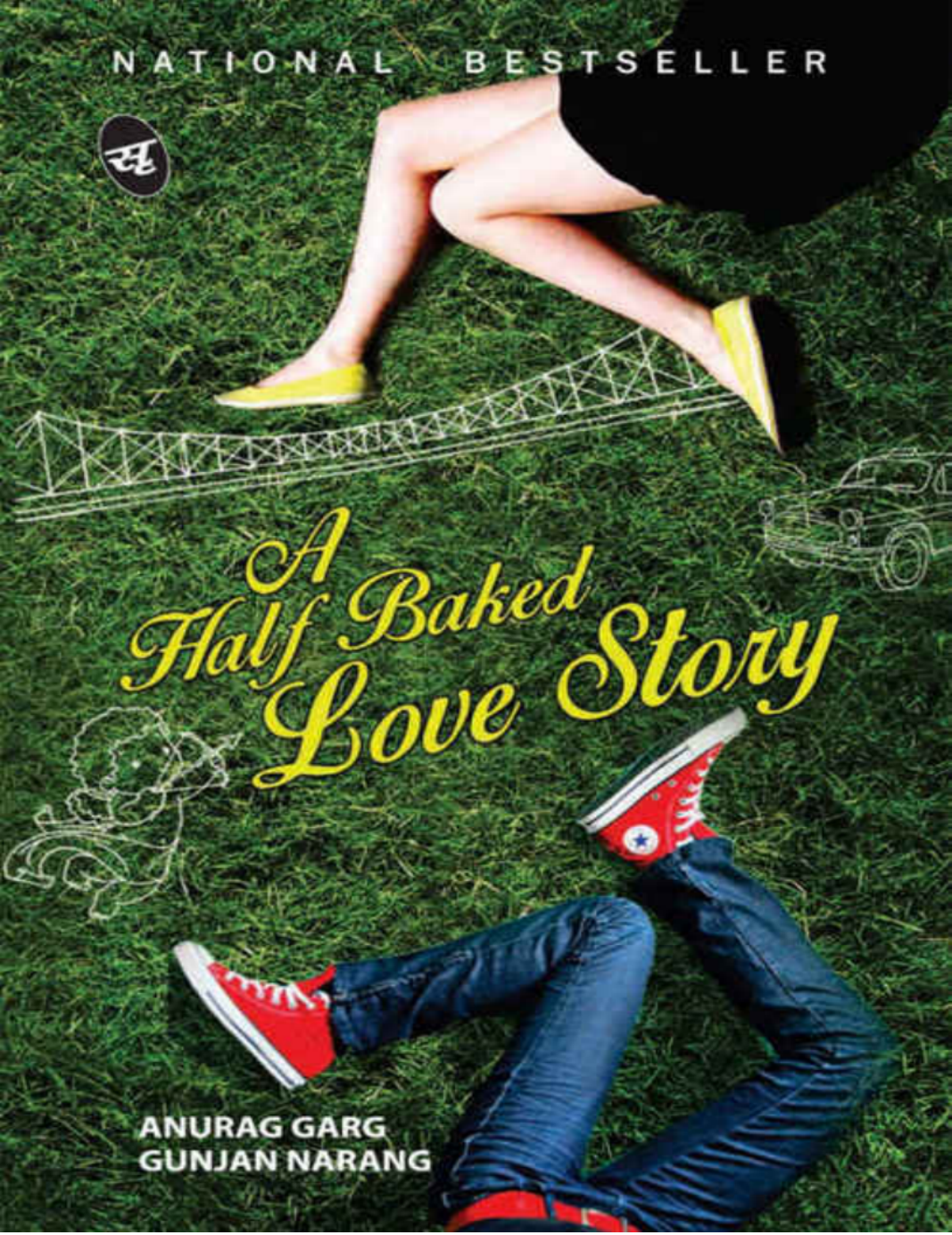

A Half Baked Love Story

ANURAG GARG
GUNJAN NARANG

A
Half Baked
Love Story

Anurag Garg is an engineering graduate from BVCOE, New Delhi. Random thoughts, eligible to be put together in the form of a storyline dragged him to his destiny, and he finally found his forte in writing. He finds himself close to nature and believes in creating circles of love and service around him. He lives in New Delhi and works in the IT industry.

Gunjan Narang, an aspiring educationist, was born in Delhi. She embraces reading and writing as her escape from the real world as well as a door to it. She wishes to explore the unexplored places of the world and write about the fast-evaporating everyday life of people.

... I Love you Rachu ...

Dear Frnds pls spread this msg until its reach to my rachu
I think see knows my name
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A Half Baked Love Story

Anurag Garg • Gunjan Narang

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“The greatest pleasure in life is doing what people say you can’t do” Dedicated to all those who motivated us!

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– Anurag Garg

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You, the reader, holding this copy right now, my heartfelt gratitude for reading our work and taking out the time to write to us. We owe the success of the book to you.

– Gunjan Narang

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Untying the knot!

"So, do you Love me Aarav?" Radhika looked at me with searching eyes as she wore her peacock colored chemise over her unzipped blue denim.

Perfect sense of dressing she had I must say, though I loved her being senseless. Her petite figure always prompted me to do something erotic. We both were having a good time from the last two hours in the minus fourth floor parking arena of Select City Walk mall inside my black tinted car.

The engine was on, to chill the ambiance for having such a fiery time consistently for hours. I was utilizing my dad's white color money in a very tinted way and Radhika was enjoying every tint of it. But something had gone wrong this time.

"What kind of an inane question is that? What has happened to you? I told you not to gulp down so many shots in one go!" I replied with a serious look on my face, shoving my hand through her long and sleek hair.

She was entirely sitting over me on the seat adjacent to the driver's one.

Coming back to this ghoulish conversation, she replied "Shut up! I was just wondering if this is love or something else… just because the every time we meet, we end up doing something fleshy like this. There is no fondness between us, don't you …"

I interrupted and pacified her, "what? What the fuck do you want to say? Isn't it fondness that we both are spending some decent time here, doing some of the worthiest things? You're drunk baby!" I think I sounded rude.

"Hey, hey…Why are you talking to me like this? Calm down! Have I offended you so much by asking if you actually love me or not?"

Now, though she spoke in a very sweet voice, she sounded rude this time for sure.

“Look Radhika don’t you dare to talk to me like that, don’t make it more knotty” I tried to calm her down pointing a finger towards her, my way of calming people down. As the conversation grew flashier, she turned down off to the adjacent seat, zipping on her denims and looked outside the other window, flawlessly doing what girls do when they want their boyfriends to delight them by some captivating one liners. Though, I was not at all in the mood to chuck her out but still…to bring the situation in control, I relaxed, took a deep breath and replied in a less rude beat this time.

“Ok Radhika. My baby! Listen to me. Just tell me, who the hell knows what this word ‘love’ does exactly mean? I have been searching the meaning for years. Do you expect me to shout my feelings for you at an echo point? Will the multiple echo voices prone my love for you? Or should I run in the fields with a guitar in my hand singing out to you?” I added a laugh and a wink, not required though.

“Aarav, why do you always have to end conversations like this? You think it’s funny? It’s not! Love is a very pure feeling. You don’t understand. I think it’s all about care, attachment and the zeal in you to be with your partner. But look at us. Do we seem to be in a relationship? The emotion that lingers between us is LUST,” she highlighted the word. “We are together, not for each other, but for the physical satisfaction that we provide to each other. Don’t you think we’re just tagged as *in relationship* while we don’t give a damn about each other’s emotions; we don’t understand each other; there’s no love… just…lust” she ended up looking straight into my eyes.

Over time, I have lost the tendency of getting sweaty whenever someone asks me anything looking into my eyes. This was the first time I saw a burning passion in her to love me. The A.C. was still on, but suddenly the temperature in the car rose abruptly. She was acting totally altered this time. She was no more the Radhika I knew three months before the college started.

Radhika was my recent fling who came face to face via facebook. Finding ‘love’ was becoming so informal these days. All you need is a facebook account with a chic display picture, full adobe photoshop art in it and you win a new girl to go around with. Unfortunately she made it to my college, fortunately, in business administration, not in bachelors of technology. Both officially and unofficially I was her senior. We just used to hang around, but out of nowhere I owned her. She told me to keep quiet on our relationship in college. I wonder why girls are so over-protective about such insignificant things. Well, that thought leads me to an undiscovered territory- Girls’ psyche! Anyways the thing is that, we never talked about personal matters to get to know each other intensely. Intertwined fingers, holding hands,

cuddling, and all that jazz, were enough, for me of course, to strengthen the pillar of our *relation*.

I completely agreed to what she said but "why now?" was the question that rushed through my mind.

Her innocent demand puzzled me all the way, may be because I was never with her to care, be attached or to make her happy but just for a label of being in a relationship or just to furnish this lust in me. Everything was going off beam now. I was totally baffled about what to say. Still I congregated some forte to put down on her.

"But you never asked for all this. You were going so easy with the way we are connected. Why now?" I questioned her again. But somehow, I was unable to look into her eyes.

"What? Should I ask you to love me?" she questioned.

"But I *do* love you" I almost pleaded this time.

"But I can't see it. I can't feel it. I can't touch it. I can just hear your easy words that lack any sign of emotions for me. Nothing Else."

I was getting very irritated now.

"How can a man who doesn't even know what love is, make a girl feel blissful? Happiness to you is liquor, love to you is lust, talking to you about this is approaching idiocy. You better go and cram what love is, but I am just so very sure that a man like you will never come around this beautiful feeling. Ever!" she ended bellicosely throwing her hands in air.

I had nothing to say in this chat. Her last sentence seriously choked me deep inside. I gulped some spittle and looked away from her. Somehow I struggled to stop myself from crying. Otherwise she would have laughed I guess. Her words left me speechless but still I managed to settle down this sweltering situation.

"Look sweetheart, we're spending such a great time together, ain't this enough?" I tried to persuade her. She was such a bimbo, a real beauty with no brains. I loved her, with or without clothes is another question.

"Ok then tell me one thing, is there any future of our relationship, Aarav?" she fired another question from her question bank to which I was tired of answering again and again. This time I finally decided to stay quiet but gave her I-don't-think-so kind of a look. "Then what next?" She lost her control.

I could imagine her being a steam engine furiously giving out smoke from her ears. Her forehead wrinkled and she fired some ugliest allegations on me, though they were correct to some extent.

"What the fuck do you think of yourself huh? Am I just another whore for you to get your legs over me every time to satisfy your drunken ass?" Her nose tip went red and her eyes were about to burst

out and blood ready to pour out of them.

“Hey mind your words girl! Did I … . . . I” I shouted with one hand in air, a gesture to give her a fair last warning to terminate her offensive conversation.

“Did I what? Blurt out whatever you have in your mind! You want to hit me, hit me then!” Her voice broke and a tear dropped down from her right eye, some others followed. She had goaded me to such an end of this meaningless relationship.

“Let it be then.” I murmured and then raised my voice in irritation.

“Did I ask you to fall in love with me? Did I force you to come out this late with me in a minus fourth floor parking to indulge in such sensual affairs after getting drunk? Look I did NOT sign a contract of ‘I will love you forever’ or ‘we will have two kids after marriage’ with you ! Grow up Radhika! It is not a big deal at all in this era. I have always pampered you with the finest of things-your dress, your accessories, your haircut and even your lingerie has been financed out of my wallet girl!” I paused to breathe. Her face reached rare shades of red.

“Do I not love you? Isn’t this love huh? Have I not supported you when you asked for? Have I not amused you every single moment we were together! Now just stiffen up your lip and don’t you cry!” I pointed a finger at her and said sternly.

And girls never do what has been told to them, in fact they do exactly the opposite. She burst into tears. “Okay then let it be, live your life and I’ll live mine. Go, find yourself a lover, don’t create a scene over here” I said roughly as it was beyond my control now. She stared at me with a puerile look on her fair beautiful face. Her dark eyes glittered as she managed to conclude this conversation, “You’d never understand what love is Aarav. Never!”

She wiped her tears off and got out of the car, pulled out her blue stelatoes and walked away leaving me all shattered from inside with a tear drop on my eyelash, though it will never fall down again for a chick at least. All I have to say is-I have always had a bad experience in car parks. An untying of another knot hit me today, but as someone has said-let go of what you can’t change, because life goes on anyhow!

My eyes followed her until she turned to look at me, another gesture inspired from a scene of a romantic Bollywood flick. However, I hate those worthless love stories, where everyone gets contented in the end, but the reality of life is far away from these unreal tales of love.

I looked away to find my commodity, my true love I guess, Jack Daniels. A whisky brand, not my boyfriend of course.

It wasn't a new situation for me. I had had girls around me for a few weeks, days or even hours. I wondered how this one lasted for more than a month. By god's grace, I was single again, ready to mingle. This one had ended in a pretty dirty way, but I guess, she well deserved it for being so senseless.

There was a little pain in my heart, to which my brain responded like- shut the fuck up dude, pump blood and stop overacting. I had my fireball-Jack Daniels.

Whisky started taking its toll on me. Something whacked me. I felt all alone in this world again. Feelings that croaked in me months back started spawning again. Each and every memory was hitting me back. I never felt like going back home that night. I sat down on the shore of a lake near my house.

It was 8:30 pm, I received no call from my mum. I turned my music player on and launched myself with the mother of all spirits. This was so unforgiving this time for me. I recalled everything that happened to me in life. I felt shattered. I was getting down with whisky, which led me into some profound memories with Anamika.

I just got into missing her. It happened to me every time I gulped more than two glasses of whisky. With each and every sip of it, a new memory of her was killing me leisurely. Her face, her smile, her fondness in me was just letting me downhearted. I too had tears somewhere in my eyes. I don't know why she was still ruling my heart and mind.

When I was putting the last touch of the bottle, I saw 9 missed calls. It was my mom. I saw the time. It was sharp 11:00 pm. All the emotions and her reminiscences robbed me and left me naïve. I felt weak and off-color and I looked-for someone to take me home but no one was around. I hoisted myself up and went straight towards my car. I fell down on the floor, thankfully not in the lake. An ice-cream seller towed me up "*kya hua beta, theek to ho*" he said. I could not hear him distinctly. I was so unconscious that I even did not repel myself from going home in this state. I tossed the man's hand away and opened my car.

I was driving at fifty kilometers per hour on the first gear. Whisky makes you totally outrageous, I guarantee. I reached home and tried to smell my own whiff. It was unpleasant odor for someone who never drinks. I decided not to utter anything and just lay down on my bed. I took baby steps. I knocked at the door.

Tragically, it was my sister. She opened the door in disgust. I stood erect confidently so as to give no clue that I was badly drunk. She looked at me from upside-down and created some dreadful looks on her face. May be it was the disgusting whiff of the whisky which not only took her breath, but also gave her some taste of it.

“Are you drunk? Mom! Look here’s your dear child in a very adorable position” she shouted. I didn’t utter a single word but I still wondered that how did she come to know about this. I just added a smile in my dull emotions and unintentionally uttered something witty. “One whisky, please! The first one was not that tempting, you know. Make it fast! Otherwise call the manager of this bar”.

“Bar?! Are you nuts or what?” She almost pushed me this time. This whole act led me to some mind-numbing and never-ending lectures. One-by-one everyone came out.

“What happened Vaibhavi, why you are shouting so loud” my mum questioned.

“Momma, shouting is always loud, silly momma”, I chuckled.

“Look at this shameless guy. Firstly, he is arriving so late and secondly, he’s badly drunk.”

“And thirdly… kindly state at least three reasons…” I said and giggled again, unaware, that I was making the situation more acute.

“My God! Totally disgraceful! By the way, where have been for so long?” my dad interrogated this time, coming from behind and trying to be in limelight of this whole act. But he had forgotten that I was playing the lead role here.

“Tell me, I am asking something” he quizzed again, his interrogation style reminded me of some ACP Pradyuman from the CID series. The way he rolled his hands, twisted his fingers and made astounded faces. But one thing I always admitted was that he was just such a terrific father. He was a BITS Pilani pass out and I was not even eligible to appear for its entrance test. But he never accused me for that. He always backed me and cheered me whenever I was mislaid, but I never paid him back as a son.

“Sir, I have just asked for a drink. These bar tenders here sir, they must be taught some hospitality. Just one drink and I promise to leave. But they are here to rest, lazy people…I am too concerned about the future of this bar ACP Pradyuman” I cried unknown of what shit I was uttering.

My father couldn’t take it anymore. Perhaps I had crossed the bridge of his patience…No! I had demolished it.

A sharp blow on my face jerked me and I heard a blast! Oops! It was the momentary contact of my father’s hand and my cheek!

Suddenly my mother started crying, it boiled the situation hastily. The scene now was no less than a picture-perfect drama act.

It all happened outside my main door, even two or three sneak peek neighbor aunties keenly scrutinized the situation. They had now got new masala for the next day’s kitty evening. My mother would surely be absent for that. Slowly I was turning out to be an unashamed idiot but still a matter of concern for my family. My endless shameful

deeds were fetching nothing, but only nicking my values, my respect and my spirits for everything that happened to me.

To hinder this whole drama my father dragged me in. It was no more funny for now, even my mother emitted a well-known one liner from old hindi movies "*Yeh din dekhne se pehle tune mujhey uthaa kyun ni liya bhagwaan!*"

Being an epitome of ignominy, I too declared something inexcusable. "God doesn't want melodrama mom, so he keeps you here", and guffawed.

Even the word shameless would have felt ashamed of me, I was crossing limits now. My sister took my mother in her bedroom and my father too left me.

Whisky slowly kills you. It was doing no less harm to me as well, I was about to be kicked out of my father's materialistic possessions.

I could no longer bear to stand straight and stumbled badly. I just remember having slept on a cold surface throughout the dark night.

I well deserved to sleep like a dog, to be treated like a dog. This is what others thought. For me, I wished I were a dog. Just get a bitch by my side.

There's No way out

Worst part of being drunk at night is that you've to face the consequences early morning, especially when you've set up enormous scenes after drinking in your own chuffing house. A twinge in your head reminds you of the quantity you gulped down and your family reminds you of the blatant behavior you displayed after being bladdered. Things become worse when you realize that the weekend is now a week away. I got up at about ten, after completely exploiting the snooze option in my alarm clock, scratching my bumps. Home is the place where you can scratch your bumps exactly where it itches. I had the nerve to get out of my room and shout for breakfast. No one was there to attend me.

My sister entered the dining room and set a plate for herself.

"Serve the breakfast for me" I commanded.

She gave me an angry stare dreadful enough to jolt me.

I swallowed.

"What would you like to have sir? Vodka? Should I make it lime this time?" she said through her teeth.

I narrowed my eyes at her and strode towards the fridge.

Empty!

What the f….!

"Will anyone tell me why am I being subjected to this brutal behavior?" I asked, infuriated.

"Why don't you ask the ACP sir?" she reverted instantly.

I growled and left for college.

I murmured to myself as I stepped out of the main door. Indian neighbors I tell you, three women stood beside our door, whispering to each other.

"Totally drunk, he is extremely shameless Mrs. Gupta, I was about to appoint him as my daughter's tutor…"

She stopped as she saw me approach.

"Oh! It's your lovely daughter that I have to teach aunty? Why

not? She dances really well when she's drunk…Reverb is perhaps her favorite pub…even the bouncer knows her really well. Maybe she can as well give me some dance lessons" I managed a smile as I spat my words at the gossip queens and jumped down a flight of stairs.

The frustration of a bad morning may spoil the impending hours of the day. No breakfast, a crabby sister and a fresh fall apart are enough to reduce your happiness to rubble. I told my brain to shut the fuck up and concentrate on something better.

On my way many curious eyes greeted me and worsened my frame of mind. My parents have been telling me constantly to bother about the chuffing society in which we have to live. It is not me who decides how to live my life, society does. Right and wrong are no more the issues of morality. Rather, they are the privilege of the society. These chiefs of society are seriously messing up lives of frivolous youngsters like me.

The Delhi metro was again offering more mood spoiling opportunities. Constant halts and apologies for delayed journey irritated hell out of me.

Acquaintances, briefly aware of your faux pas, point at you, nudge the ones they accompany and whisper to each other. Bloody losers! They don't have the guts enough to confront you and say their opinions about you aloud at your face.

'The next station is Punjabi bagh'.

I heaved a sigh of relief as my destination arrived. My relief was short lived. At the entrance of our engineering wing, for no reason, stood Radhika with swollen eyes. She purposefully applied no eye make-up to highlight the puffy eyes she had. Beside her, stood the hunk of the Business Administration wing- Debashish Sen. He was a typical Bengali boy with a satisfactory dressing sense and good physique. Girls found his dimples pretty electrifying. Despite all that, he was gawky at times. Ha had been one of the people who nurtured hard feelings for me for being *in a relationship* with Radhika. Radhika had once informed me that he had asked her if they could be more than friends. He proposed in an awkward manner.

I remember it made me roll on the floor and laugh at his proposal.

He had bent down on his knees in a corny manner, took Radhika's hand and said, "*kya aap humaare bachho ko sagey bhai behen banne ka mauka dengi?" G*awky, as I said.

Now that I and Radhika had split up, it was his chance to display some heroic deeds. He strode towards me in a classy gait. An eye contact was established. He narrowed his eyes at me. I gave an ugly stare.

There was tension in the air. I reached my pocket for my knuckles. Heavens know I wanted to hit him hard for nothing. I

tapered my eyebrows at that plague.

He growled and … aaaannnchhiiii!

He sneezed. Gawky, as I've mentioned over and over again.

I managed not to laugh.

"So, you want to be turned inside out?" Deb made a poor attempt at threatening me.

"I believe in application rather than verbalizing, you asshole!" I snarled and approached him to give him a smack in his dimpled cheeks.

He must have felt dizzy for a while, for longer maybe. I had no intentions of ceasing him of his end, but I had better things to do in the college

I clicked my fingers and pointed a finger at him. Not the index or the pinkie, nor the ring or the thumb, it's the one you pull up when you don't give a fuck.

He recovered the trauma and stepped back.

From the corner of my eye I noticed him holding Radhika by her shoulder and trying to stop her tears that flowed endlessly. I wonder where do girls get their tear stocks from and altered shoulders every time.

I walked untroubled and entered my classroom. It was now the professor's chance at me.

"Look, college's cool dude is here. Welcome him my friends" He raised a brow at me.

"Please continue sir, no formalities" I smirked.

"Get out of my class you spoiled brat! Good-for-nothing! You think you'd enter my class half an hour late and I'd let you shake off that easily?"

"I'm not late…I'm early for the next lecture" I said and made a face.

The whole class giggled as Mr. Talwar scowled. This particular professor had unidentified grudges against me. I tried to solve them in the beginning, but now I think answering back is so much more fun!

The college was much of a chaotic building these days. Every next student was either busy in organizing an event or in coordinating one for some rubbish credential. I was busy in hunting for some good-looking chicks rolling up from Delhi University to our campus for attending such a lackluster carnival. After a long hectic month of some ludicrous assessments, this was the time for putting some ice on our heads.

Everyone left to join their respective events and I and Karan left for occasion in anticipation. Karan Arora, my best buddy, a bulky guy with a harebrained persona, also the one who keeps falling prey to even the poorest of bullies without any reasons. Nobody knew

anything better about me than him at this point of my life, he was a bestie indeed from high school days! Some pretty hot chicks lingered about in the college premises. I was damn bored of the girls of our college. Headlines today: College carnival brings new stock for admiral!

We sat on a bench which had the clear view of all possible happenings. Girls walked by and we gave numbers out of ten corresponding to their figures. Most of them were a six! Looks are deceptive, so don't just look. Give a full stare! And we did the same.

Suddenly, I noticed a familiar face in the crowd, seven if you ask me. A slim girl, dressed in a body hugging charcoal gray top and denims, pulled out a pencil from behind her ear as she instructed some volunteer about some event's chores.

Oh fish! MISHKA! Small round world!

Mishka Narula and I studied together till tenth standard and changed our schools. She willingly did that due to her tiff with a guy and I changed it unwillingly. Parental care you know. They wanted me to study in some remarkable high school, which literally scratched my life out. We were not in contact for four long years, but we used to be great friends. Some experiences lead us spaced out. I knew she was friends with Radhika, the bitch told me once that they both were high school friends. Literally, it is a small round world!

For a moment I thought of saying hi to her. Then I noticed her approaching my topical foe- Deb.

"WOAH! Is she dating that loser?" I wondered "like I give it a damn!"

I turned to find my way to something better to think about.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Deb and Radhika greeting Mishka like she's some very beloved friend. I had a momentary eye contact with Radhika. Deb was standing right behind her like a bodyguard.

Mishka suddenly raised her hand to call out for me. Radhika nudged her, abruptly pointing her little finger at me and whispered something. Girls! I tell you. They are faster than Indian media when it comes to publicizing issues. Mishka, who seemed pleased to see me a fraction-of-a-second before, gave a disgusted expression. I didn't bother to greet her and walked out of that event with Karan.

The best part of the college carnival is the platinum opportunity to soothe your eyes with best of human wonders – girls of all shapes & sizes, all colors and heights are available, dressed in their best to draw the attention of admirers of beauty like me. I must have been looking

pretty handsome that day. I noticed many hot chicks eying me every now and then. Desperate singles you call them!

"Hiiiiiii… Aarav!" a familiar voice jerked me out of my thoughts. I turned around to respond and found Mishka looking at me with some mixed emotions.

"Oh! Hi" I couldn't speak more than that. Actually, I didn't want to fuel any conversation with her that would lead me to Radhika.

"How have you been? Changed so much ehh?" she said in a taunting accent.

"Change is the rule of life" I reverted rudely. "Excuse me, I need to go" I said.

"Wait! I need to talk" she exclaimed.

"What?" I said, avoiding any eye contact with her.

"I need to know why you did this to Radhika?" she had fiery eyes as she abruptly shot her question. It was personal if you ask me!

"And why the fuck I'm answerable to you?"

"This is how you talk to an old friend?" her tone softened. "This is how I'm, got a problem? Then don't talk to me" arrogance ruled my voice.

"You used to be such a reserved and decent guy, what has become out of you Aarav?" she said stressing on the word 'decent' trying that emotional blackmail thing on me and I had no intentions of becoming a victim of her words.

"I need to go!" and I paced towards my gang. She strode towards me and clutched me through my elbow.

"But I need to know why, the things Radhika told me about you were just not realistic to me", she emphatically said. "If not now, then whenever you want".

"How about never?" I said as I jerked her hand away and joined Karan and gang to get something out of the day. I walked through the crowd of party animals, a dozen memories of my secondary school years hovered my mind.

"Oh I'm sorry!" a sweet voice apologized as I felt something scorching my skin. "Owww, fuck man!" I uttered as I turned in disgust. A lovely lady dressed in a black off shoulder top and blue denim mini gave an apologetic smile as she spilled her hot chocolate on me.

"Pleasure is all mine!" I spoke, elongating each and every letter as I assessed her from top to bottom, you know, 'top to bottom', with two big pauses.

"Sorry?" she said, laughing at my reply I guess. I regained consciousness and realized I should have said "It's okay!"

A hand suddenly went around her waist as I took the napkin from her.

“I just spilled my hot chocolate”, she said in a childish tone to the guy who had grabbed her and made a puppy dog face.

‘Why all hot girls are committed to such nasty puppies?’ I asked within.

Her full lips and the pink gloss on them drew my attention. Juicy ones…her lips.

“Come let’s get you another one love”, said that bastard and he kissed her. My gaze followed her sexy legs. I wondered how girls manage to flaunt such revealing clothes in this chilling winter.

“She’s gone…hot one by the way” I said as Karan punched my shoulder.

“Darn it! Her curves have ruined you, you were lost in the depths of her…”Karan paused and winked at me.

“Eyes” I added as we both laughed hard.

I enjoyed the company of this asshole. He never tried to make a mess out of my life. I cleaned up the hot chocolate from my jacket.

In the evening, war of DJs, perpetual party, girls, and much more awaited us. My party freak gang soon joined me. I grabbed a bottle of whisky from Karan and we were on for a grand party.

Deafening music, alcohol, and hot chicks the trio makes life a heaven to live.

I suddenly felt something vibrating in my jeans. Oh! It was just my phone, must be mom.

Unknown number, I disconnected.

We partied hard that evening. I bothered to look at my phone at 2:00 a.m. Five missed calls from the same number.

I texted my sister that I’d stay at my friend’s place for the night, as if informing her mattered at 2 am.

A lot of alcohol had poisoned our blood and the body heat was rising. We went to Raman’s house to spend the night, a Richie with a separate apartment.

When I regained my senses, my head was stuck to a hairy chest.

“Whose darn bed is this? Why are you in your boxers? Bloody hell! Why am I only in my boxers?” I panicked.

“Hey hey! Chillax! I’ve not raped you”’ said Raman as he grabbed his pillow, turned over and snored again. He slid his hand down to scratch his filthy ass, while Karan was forced to rest on the floor.

I looked for my clothes, put them on and walked out. My phone again did silly things to my pants. I sometimes really hate the vibration mode. It was the same number, who the hell is pestering me now?

I was about to pick the call but now, the battery ditched me.

I drove towards the hell-my home, home pest home!

The best thing about reaching home at 12 noon is that you only have to face mom. It is far easier to tolerate her when dad isn't around. She speaks and I ignore, easy enough. But perhaps all dogs have their day, this was my day. Mom wasn't at home. She had gone for her kitty.

My empty stomach made embarrassing noises. I broke into my house and conquered the kitchen. Gobbling up a sandwich, I put my phone on charging. As I switched it on, it rang again.

"Hello, whose this?" I said in an impressive tone expecting a hot chick with a sensual voice.

"Hi Aarav, does it cost you a million dollars to pick a call?" "Who's that?" I said as I chewed my sandwich.

"Mishka this side, can I have a few precious minutes of your day sir?"

"What is it Mishka?" I asked, annoyed.

"I want to meet you."

How straight forward! This is how she was. Different from other girls in the sense that she never offered long useless conversations, only blatant significant statements.

"I have a busy schedule this week."

"I never said that meeting you next week is a problem for me."

"I'll see to it, okay bye" I hung up.

Mishka's sudden interference made my stomach twitch. Maybe it was something you call-guilt. But I thought I had become immune to being guilty for breaking up with bimbos.

"Aaargh!" I roared, growled and threw my sandwich away.

A text beeped on my phone.

"*Derz no point of avoidin me…m not here 2 make u feel guilty or 2 shower lectures on u… jus wana talk 2 u…I xpct a rply –Mishka*"

"*luk Mishka, I seriously don't wana discuss bout anything, leave me alone…u r no1 to sudnly cm n make a mess of my life lik that…so jus mind ur own chuffin busness*"

This is what I wanted to reply, but I preferred avoiding.

If she doesn't want to make me feel guilty, why is she so desperate to have a word with me? The question boggled my mind.

I strode up and down my room, pulled the curtains, jumped up and down my sofa, skipped through television channels but the restlessness didn't pass away.

The doorbell rang. Mishka's terror shook me. Has she now tracked my house? I stumbled twice before I grabbed the door knob and opened it enough to peep through.

To my relief, it was just my lovely mom. She didn't give expressions as I have described before.

Suddenly, when she entered, she looked like a fierce version of Indian police officer ready to sputter interrogative statements on me about my absence from the house and my late-coming. I could visualize her dressed in khaki uniform tapping her stick and eyeing me with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh mom! It's you! I'm so glad you're back! I'm so damn hungry, get something to calm my belly down" I made a modest attempt to distract her from the list of questions she was preparing in her mind.

A mother is an epitome of care, she forgets everything once her child cries with hunger.

Well, this was just an assumption of my splendid mind.

"Do you want me to pack your bags and throw you out with them or are you yourself abandoning the house?"' she shouted loud enough to scare the pigeons away from our window.

Umm… my mom- the modern mom, uses alternative ways to show love and care.

"I'm ashamed of my womb that gave birth to a drunkard like you. Your father has never touched alcohol all his life"

Well, now this was surely an exaggeration.

She sobbed and continued, "I wonder if his blood still rushes through your veins. Oh! No! It's alcohol only. We brought you up for witnessing this day?" and my mother broke down into noisy howling.

"The whole world pinpoints me because of you. I cannot walk out of the home. You are the burning topic everywhere. My friends bitch about me because of you. Firstly you missed your IIT for that girl and now doing all this rubbish."

Well, this is what pinched a bit too much. My past was my real and only weakness.

I am not the actual problem, my deeds aren't the slip-up. Society is what bothers my mom!

"Calm down mom!" I reached out to her to hold her.

Bang! She hit me real hard.

"Get lost! Live at whoever's place you want to" She shouted and switched back to crying.

"I am so sorry mom", I uttered my most-used-phrase with a shameless smile and caught my mother's hand gently.

And my job was done. I saw her heart melting. I wiped her tears and hugged her. I had mastered the field of female psychology by now. I could handle any of them pretty easily.

I stayed home all day despite the frequent ugly stares and cribbing from everyone in the house.

I dragged myself and tried to spend time on Facebook, phone games, staring at the walls, trying to discover new angles of lying on my couch to have a better view of my ceiling fan and so on.

My phone rang.

Not Mishka! Not Mishka! Not Mishka!

Well, maybe my prayers were wasted in compensating for the sins of my previous birth. There was she- the recent pest of my life and there was no way out. For once I thought of flushing my phone but then I dropped the idea and picked up the call.

"Hello!"

"Hello Aarav! How are you?" she talked in a highly cheerful tone.

"I'm fine…so?"

"Do you like to party?"

"Yeah, who doesn't?" I exclaimed but on realizing whom I was talking to, I calmed down and continued, "But why?"

"Remember Devika?"

Why is she bringing such random topics in between?

"The girl sticking to your side 24×7 in school?" I tried to sound oblivious, but in reality, I could never forget that girl. She secretly had a crush on me. She was too garrulous, nosey and well… I accept she had a cute smile.

"Oh shut up Aarav! She is in the town for new year celebrations"

"In town? She went abroad?"

Well, now this was something actually unfair on my part. I was better than her in academics, still, she gets the break to foreign universities. Luck, what the fuck!

Mishka's never ending chattering distracted me from my gloomy failures.

"Yeah…you know, those well off people throw their children in foreign universities. She's returning this week and throwing a New Year party – all friends are invited, she'd be just so happy to see you"

"Oh wait! Who said I'm coming?"

"Of course you are coming. No excuses! Farmhouse, chilling winter, bonfire, drinks, music! Eeeiiii! I'm so excited! And our first invitation goes to you. You can't turn it down like that. Have some courtesy handsome."

"Okay, I'll tell you about my plans", I replied in an exhausted tone and hung up.

Whoa! She didn't utter a word about Radhika. Maybe she really doesn't want to have a sneak peek into my life.

Party…eh? I really needed a break from pubs and bitches. Not at all a bad idea! "But if Mishka is coming…NO! That means Radhika is

coming!” I shouted loud enough to agitate my father.

“Alcohol not yet off your nerves Mr. Son of ACP?” Dad commented.

I got up from the couch, went straight to my room and banged the door.

I slept to avoid random thoughts.

Life goes on

Karan, the asshole's call woke me up the next morning.

"You've not yet been suspended from the college. Are you coming or not?"

"Hmm…catch ya in one hour" I yawned and took a leave from my bed.

The day was quite monotonous until I came across Deb.

"I'm going to take you down"' Deb set a spark.

"Fucked in the head or what? Deb's keema is on the menu today", I said to Raman and Karan as we laughed out loud.

We both snarled at each other as Deb dared to grab my collar.

Radhika came running and caught my arm. "Leave him", she nearly pleaded.

"You must have asked your swine-head guy to stay away from me", I growled and jerked her hand away

Deb gave me a little punch in my belly. It felt like a tickle.

"So, a warning ain't enough huh, you son of a bitch."

I curled up my fingers into a punch.

Radhika rushed for help.

A whole lot of free show viewers gathered around. Only one of them had the courage to intervene- Mishka. She made unsuccessful attempts to depart the two enemies. The crowd scattered the moment our dean surpassed. Deb the coward ass hugged me to escape suspension. I gave him a sharp blow in the ribs as he tried to offer a bear hug. I wished I could kick him hard in the groin.

Suddenly Deb fell on the ground.

"Deb!" Mishka screamed in terror. "What happened to him?" she shouted at me.

Deb was lying on the ground, his mouth bleeding.

"He must have done something", said Radhika in a terrified tone.

"Help us to get him to the doctor you motherfuckers!" Mishka

shouted at the crowd gathering to watch the drama. I had never seen Mishka getting so hyper and uttering such swear words.

Two boys stepped forward to help Deb to get into a car.

I got worried indeed.

"I'm gonna get your balls!" Radhika spat the words at me as she dialed a number, maybe an ambulance, I wondered, too astounded to think properly.

A few minutes later, I realized that the SOS dialed by her was not 102, it was 100!

Unlike very often, Delhi police reached in time!

"This guy, officer, he had issues with Deb. He has tried to take him down once before as well. I can get you many witnesses" Radhika blurted as I watched, not knowing what to do. There was no point in running away.

A broad chested police inspector faced me as I swallowed. The inspector held me by my collar.

"Another rich man's brat, aren't you?" he said and laughed wickedly. "Aah! How I love taking up such cases."

He gave me the once-over as if he was getting extreme sexual pleasure by looking at me alone. What can be worse than falling a prey to a gay police officer?

"Bbbbbb…but you can't arrest me until that guy gives his statement. I just hugged him." I stuttered and made an attempt to at least delay my lockup.

The inspector nodded and we prepared to depart for the hospital. Meanwhile Mishka and Deb had gone to the hospital. That day, for the second time, I got the opportunity to ride in a PCR. It is surely not a car you'd like to be in, especially seated in the back seat with *the hawaldaar*. Some old memories rushed via my nerves again.

We arrived at the hospital where Deb had been admitted. Mishka and Radhika stood there with some acquaintances.

"Are you happy now?" Mishka shouted and gave a disgusted expression as she saw me coming.

"Quiet ma'am, please, it's a hospital", a nurse came to my rescue. The doctor came and informed about Deb's condition. He had hurt his rib bone but his condition was pretty stable now. Permission was granted to the inspector to visit him. It was now time to welcome my new accessory-handcuffs!

Inspector went inside the ICU. What is taking him so long! Every second was a burden. Deb was now going to avenge for everything, of every encounter with me, Radhika's breakup, his broken rib! I was in deep shit. Everyone's expressions made it difficult for me to stand the situation.

The inspector came out after 905 seconds. Yes I was counting

each and every second. I raised my hands towards him, surrendering my hands to the jingling handcuffs.

“The boy said he doesn’t want to file any complaint against Aarav. There was no fight, and Aarav didn’t hurt him deliberately”, the officer declared.

“But sir! I can get you a half a hundred witnesses against this man”, Radhika spoke through her teeth.

“If Deb files no complaints against him, we cannot take an action. You’re free to go boy, be careful in future.” The gay officer patted my shoulder and left. I was too perplexed to react. I looked around. I felt my body being drained of something. I could make no sense of anything. I was totally numb. I rushed to the doctor.

“Can I meet him once?”

The doctor nodded and I ran into the room.

The whole hospital apparatus gave a sharp blow to my head. The door behind me screeched open again and Mishka and Radhika entered. Deb was lying on the bed with all those oxygen mask and crap that I had only seen once in my life.

“Why did you do this favor to me?” my voice broke.

Deb opened his eyes and smiled.

“Because I am not Aarav” His words were a mere whisper but they echoed several times in my head. I stared at him in utter astonishment. A tingling sensation rushed up through my spine and affected my eyes. They were moist. I swallowed.

“He’s not the guy I’ve known since childhood. I know people change, but they transform so drastically?” Mishka murmured the rhetorical question to Radhika.

Forgiveness is the biggest revenge, I had heard, and today, I was experiencing it.

Deb’s gesture had invoked in me a feeling that I had become invulnerable to: shame, guilt.

My knees could no longer bear my weight and I fell on the floor, my head held in my knees. A stinging soreness conquered my chest.

A gentle hand rested on my shoulder, “Are you okay?” Mishka’s voice stroke my ear. The nurse entered, “Grant him some rest, move out please.”

Mishka supported me to get up. Radhika’s hatred towards me knew no bounds. She kept murmuring every now and then.

We moved out to the hospital cafeteria. I still couldn’t have a complete control on my senses. The girls didn’t force me to speak. Only girls know when it is right to leave someone on their own. If they can chat endlessly, they can also maintain a comfortable silence to soothe you.

“Ahem! Coffee?” Radhika broke the perpetual noise of kitchen

utensils.

I nodded my head in agreement.

I absent-mindedly gulped down the coffee all at once as if it was water and moved out of the cafeteria.

I had always longed to see Deb in this condition. What had happened to me now? Why am I being so affected by the situation? Or is it his words that have killed the shamelessness in me? I wandered aimlessly in the lawn.

Many classmates had gathered there for Deb, they had hatred for me in their eyes. They absolutely detested me for my evil deed. One chance and I'd be their prey, quenching their thirst of my blood. I couldn't establish an eye contact with them. I suddenly had a strong urge to meet Deb. I took long steps towards ICU.

The scenario of the hospital always upsets me and reminds me of some bad memories I made long ago!

Pain is such a dominant feeling in every heart in the premises- a feeling that I had forgotten long ago. Sweeping my thoughts away, I peeped through the ICU window to have a look at Deb. He was fast asleep. The nurse rushed into me to inform that he was on anaesthesia. I turned back and found Radhika and Mishka in the corridor.

"Will he be alright?" I managed to ask, still not able to look into their eyes.

"What do you…", Radhika roared but Mishka caught hold of her.

"Yes he'll be fine very soon. I think you should go home. Your family must be tensed, we're here for him. Don't worry", said Mishka in a restful tone.

I didn't respond to it and walked to the lobby and occupied a bench there.

The day had exhausted me physically, mentally and perhaps emotionally as well. Yes, emotions weren't completely dead in me. The dormant sentiments were paving their way through my heart. I took a nap sitting on the bench. I suddenly woke up when someone wrapped a shawl around my shoulders.

"Oh I'm sorry I woke you up son" It was Deb's mother. She looked like a typical Indian mother, her face showed extreme pain as a part of her own flesh was experiencing immense pain, all because of me. Hats off to the mother who had come to comfort the culprit of her son! I shook my head. "How's Deb now?" the question came involuntarily out of me. I had never expressed such concern for anyone.

Radhika surpassed. She looked at me and gave a promiscuous look. "I

thought you went back to some pub to celebrate," She said.

I shrugged.

"Umm…well, Deb woke up a few minutes ago. He'll be discharged in about three days. By the way, you dropped your phone at the ICU. Your mum has been calling a lot of times. I informed her that you were caring for a friend in the hospital. She sounded like she didn't believe me. No one expects care and affection from you." She taunted, almost threw the phone into my face and left.

I went to the rest room and splashed some cold water on my face. I saw myself in the mirror. Was this the same guy that I had seen early morning in the mirror. How can an incident, such insignificant, change me so drastically?

My phone buzzed again. Mom!

"Hello, yes mom?"

"Now which bar is your lodging this night? And who was that girl? Too decent to be your friend."

"MOM! My friend has faced a serious accident, I'm here with him at the hospital. I slept for a while, so my friend attended the call, that's it. I'll be home as soon as things settle."

"Are you okay?" Mom's voice suddenly softened.

"Yeah mom, bye. Love you. Take care"

"Huh? Come again?" She sounded so astounded. "Who's there?"

It had been so long that I bid goodbye to mom like that. "Come on mom, I love you. Bye now" And I disconnected the phone.

Deb's thought suddenly replaced all nonsense in my mind and I walked towards the ICU to meet him. Mishka and Radhika were already sitting beside him throwing lame jokes to cheer him up.

"Ahem…well, may I join you guys?" I interrupted their friendly conversation. There was deadly silence for a while until Mishka stood up to offer me a seat beside Deb.

"Yeah, why not. Come and sit here" She added a pleasant smile.

I hesitated. Deb made a gesture to call me near him. I sat beside him.

"I…I'm…I mean…you…" and then I had a lump in my throat on seeing the hospital apparatus again. I couldn't speak.

Deb raised his hand to pat my shoulder, his face showed the extreme pain that the movement was causing him. I held his hand gently and rested it by his side. Deb always reminded me of Kishnendu, and the relation we shared. Anyways, coming back!

"I'm sorry" I finally spoke with moist eyes.

Radhika threw her hands up in the air in disgust. Mishka gave her

an ugly stare.

Deb just smiled.

“Aarav was here whole day for you” Mishka made an attempt to change the topic.

“And he was here because of me the whole day” I spoke out of guilt and hung my head down in shame.

“And we’ll be together from now on” Deb chuckled and shouted because of the sudden jerk in his ribs.

“Friends?” He said as he raised his hand towards me the way children do after a fight.

I again felt a lump in my throat. Why is he so darn forgiving? He was making me feel more guilty by his gestures.

“Still holding some grudges, huh?” Deb said and winked at me.

“Nah!” I shook hands with him.

“Oww!” he screamed in pain.

“Oops! Sorry!” I gave an apologetic smile.

“I don’t forgive you”, he suddenly became serious.

“I know it isn’t that easy for you”, I grimaced.

“Hey chillax boy! You’ve a punishment” And the innocent smile returned on his face. He winked at Mishka and Radhika who were sitting quietly meanwhile. Mishka winked back and Radhika groaned.

“Anything sir”, I stretched my back and sat like a sincere student.

“Anything?” he asked emphatically.

I nodded.

“Well, you’ve to spend the new year with us” He grinned.

“And?” I was expecting something like a punishment.

“That’s it. New year night with us. Our lovely friend is throwing a party at her farmhouse.”

“I’ve already told him, infact the first invitation went to him”, Mishka nearly jumped with excitement.

“Oh! Great then! So that is your punishment, your act of contrition and all that crap!” Deb smirked.

“Ok, I’ll come”, I said.

The nurse came to tell us that doctor was going to visit now, so we must leave the room.

“Take care Deb”, I patted his hand gently and walked out after Mishka and Radhika.

Deb’s mother encountered us in the corridor. “Thank you so much *beta*, for being here at this difficult moment “, she said as she came closer.

“Aunty, he’s our friend. He’s our concern as well. Don’t say thanks, please”, Radhika said and hugged her.

Deb’s mother tried to hold back her tears but she couldn’t. She was just like any other sentimental Indian mother, with a tired

worried face, down with the burdens of a married life.

"You all must go home now, your parents must be worried", Aunty expressed concern.

"Okay. But please let us know if you need anything, aunty", Mishka said and we left.

We moved towards the hospital exit and it was time to break the uncomfortable silence hovering between us.

"So, may I drop you both at your house?" I tried to be a bit chivalrous.

"We know our way to our respective homes" Radhika uttered bitterly.

And then the girls had a little non-verbal conversation via eyes. I wondered why do girls prefer to exchange emotions via eyes. Boys aren't aware of this language. They are not trained at this. And then it is Us who is blamed for not understanding their feelings. Won't it be easy if they say out loud what they want?

Mishka delivered the conclusion of their conversation, "can you please drop us at my place?" "Oh yes, sure" I expressed my happiness in being of any help.

I realized that there was no car. I buzzed Karan to get his car and reach the hospital as early as possible.

Karan, the driver for the day, was at our service in fifteen minutes.

The ladies got seated at the back and we drove towards our destination. Only Mishka's guidelines were the silence breakers throughout the way.

We reached Mishka's place in about twenty minutes

We received some warm acknowledgements from Mishka for the favor, while Radhika turned away pretending to make a call. We bade goodbye to the girls and I kicked Karan's bummies and asked him to drop me at my place.

I hugged and thanked the ass for his help in need.

I rang the doorbell.

"So, you're back! Bladdered again?" My crackbrained sister threw the question at me as she opened the door.

I ignored her, as always.

"Ewww! You smell like morphine."

"Because hospitals don't offer whisky", I reverted back rudely.

"Oh! I see. So that friend's accident was not a fictitious story?" She tried to provoke me.

"Why don't you just get married and pester your in-laws instead?"

I pulled her pony and poked her in the forehead. She ran to catch a hold of me as I laughed and ran forward. It had been so long that I had not had such *brother-sister-ribbing-moments* with her.

She pinched my ear and dragged me to mom who was serving dinner for me. I followed her crying in pain and shouting, ”Ow! Ow! Ow!” till she finally decided to release my ear and clutch my spikey hair.

“He’s quite eager to get me married, mom”, she complained.

“I don’t see a problem in that”, mom winked at me and gave me a hi-five!

My sister gave a wild-cat look but finally joined us in the cheerful moment.

“I missed you so much”, she said as she ruined my hairstyle by ruffling my hair.

I wrapped my hand around her shoulder and cuddled her.

She was the most annoying girl of the world if you ask me, but this annoyance was the world’s most lovable annoyance to me once.

Yes. Times had changed me, but what exactly changed me was the question people asked, and I never had an answer! Mishka was trying the same thing I guess, her sudden new invitation even after meeting again after such a long time, smelled fishy to me. Anyhow, family was a forgotten territory but not now. I felt a bit transformed again, the wheel of time always played purposely with me.

I had heard-small incidents may bring huge changes in one’s life. I was experiencing this time and again in my life. Who knew it- I’d spend such a joyous moment with my family; I’d be friends with Deb, who was born to be my enemy; I’d live without being intoxicated for one whole day; I’d stay in hospital because I’m concerned about the one I have hurt.

Well, life is enigmatic. But it goes on, and I realized it again.

New Year's Night!

"Oh! Aarav?" The beauty interrogated and stepped towards me and offered to shake hands.

She raised her sunglasses and rested them on her head.

Devika it was!

"It's so good to see you, you haven't changed much, eh?" she said cutely.

"My pleasure, but yes you have changed a lot Devika. I was unable to recognize at first! Anyways, how have you been there?" I said with a wink.

"It is all great out there, but not you guys unfortunately", she stated making a cuter face now.

"If you people are finished, shall we proceed for the party, we are already short of time?" Mishka finally broke her silence. Meanwhile Deb managed to smile with broken ribs standing beside the beauties.

THE DAY had arrived. Everything was set. It was now the time to heave a sigh of relief. We claimed our coffee mugs at the large gathering hall in the farmhouse.

An ideal New Year celebration was going to happen right here, in front of our eyes.

The setting was huge! Green dewy grass, dark foggy night, decorative lights added to the magnificence of the scene. The freezing wind chilled my body. Logs of wood were ready to be lit. Food, drinks, music, everything altogether created an enthralling effect.

"Whoa! Now that's something!" Deb exclaimed.

Friends had started to gather. They greeted them warmly.

Karan and Raman came a bit late, I hugged them.

"Changed again, eh?" Karan said as I smiled at him.

Loud music and party animals filled the place. Everyone shook their legs, ate their belly out and drank to the fullest. It was good to see old acquaintances gather at one place. I drank a lot, indeed.

Changing in every aspect is also bad.

The music stopped for a minute.

It was 12! We were in 2011!

HAPPY NEW YEAR! HAPPY NEW YEAR! HAPPY NEW YEAR! HAPPY NEW YEAR!

The music started again and it continued to become louder. I remember having dropped on the dance floor. Deb carried me to the couch. What for?

Oops! I was drunk! I kissed Deb on his head. It happens when you're drunk hard!

"I love you bro! I really do!" I shouted. We all hugged each other!

A few couples who were having their private moments were disturbed by my noise. I gave them an embarrassed look and showed thumbs up!

It was getting colder. The drunken party animals had started to disperse. Couples sat in corners kissing and cuddling each other.

Deb left me alone to get something to fill his empty stomach. I focused hard to balance my head and looked around me.

One of the duos was perhaps having a quarrel. I eavesdropped.

"My family won't allow, we have no future", and the girl broke into tears. She sighed and continued.

"We need to get separated. I am sorry. I love you. But this is just not possible. My family would die of shame"

And she started sobbing again.

The guy was, in a moment, down in the dumps, his face turned pale and he fell on the ground. "Please control yourself, you have to be happy, for my sake, life doesn't stop. You have to live, you have to love."

The guy looked at the girl and managed a few words, "Will you be able to love someone else?"

The girl had nothing to say and she walked towards the nearby tree for support.

The guy seemed deprived of life and I could visualize him as a crying statue.

I had no control on my own body, but I stepped forward to help him.

Tears trickled down my eyes. I patted his shoulder lightly and hugged him. He whimpered.

"I sympathize with you boy, I can empathize indeed"

Deb caught me and apologized to the guy. He still was sitting dead, only tears giving sign of life in him.

The moment took me into my past. Everything was fresh and clear, every memory that I had erased burdened my chest. I started

breathing heavily.

Karan and Mishka came to help me.

Deb arranged a couch for me near the bonfire.

It was about 2:00 AM. Almost everyone had left.

We were too tired to move. My tears didn't have any plans of stopping. Mishka finally gathered the courage to draw near and demand the reason of my perpetual moaning.

"What is troubling you Aarav?" she asked in a low voice.

"Nothing."

"C'mon, Aarav, you can share with us. You'll feel better!" Deb exclaimed.

"It isn't a single event, it's the unsurpassed chapter of my life that taught me to love, to live…in a moment, I was the happiest person of the universe, and perhaps I was not destined to be so content and opportune…and then everything changed… I was deprived of her…of everything…it was a dark phase of my life that changed everything."

Everyone had their eyes glued on me. I was yelling like a madman. It was not only whisky this time. Something else had struck my chords!

"Beer has taken over his senses", Devika murmered.

Everyone ignored her.

"Can you please be a bit more clear, may we be a bit more informed?" Deb demanded. As Karan tried to say something but I interrupted him.

"I don't have the courage to live those moments again… I have been running from this for a long time. Let it be an elapsed memory", and then my tears resumed flowing.

Everyone started insisting.

They were extremely interested in knowing my story, even Karan had some eagerness on his face, though he knew things but still was unaware of the whole story.

Indian crowd is always keenly interested in knowing about every happy or sad experience of someone's life.

Deb occupied my right side and said, "No one can force you boy, if you are comfortable in telling your story, we're your listeners, or else…yours is the final verdict."

This is how you can differentiate between friends and good friends. Good friends always place your comfort as their first priority. I had no intentions of turning down their requests now or you can say the rolls down in my head provoked me to yell those moments of life. It happened to me whenever I drank.

I made up my mind to address the audience. I cleared my throat. Seeing me getting ready to be a story teller, everyone settled around the bonfire and looked eagerly at me. For a moment I felt like an old

grandma being awaited to narrate a story to her children.

I gulped some spittle and uttered, “I had a love story…I fell for someone…she was my love, my life, the most beautiful and lovable creation of the almighty…my angel, Anamika!” My voice broke. “This is what you were asking for, Mishka. Something that totally changed me. You’ll get your answers today!”

I looked up to find open mouthed crowd staring at me, discontented by the statement I just made.

I began…

The fake smile is in place, the tears are well hidden, my eyes show nothing but my voice has a story to tell.

The first glimpse of her which left me squandered.

I was lost, she ruined me unknowingly.

It was then, when my heart went astray,

She made me fall, she inspired me up, she helped me to live and went away…

First glimpse!

July 2, 2008.

My secondary school boards were over. I had scored pretty average in them. Well, 88.7% was considered an average score in my family. I had to change my school as my father wanted me to study in some good reputed school. I was dragged away from my friends. I felt like a primary school kid, unwillingly sent to school that day.

This was the first time I saw her. I reached school in time, as it was my first day in the institution. To be more depressed, I had taken science stream. Everything was making me anxious. I felt an urge to run away. I wasn't a very sociable person. So, I couldn't gather the courage to take an initiative to introduce myself to the new devils that surrounded me. I personally believe that they should have been courteous enough to help me feel comfortable in this new school.

Friends hugged each other as they were meeting after a long summer break. But I had no one to even ask that how was I feeling, who the hell I was, no one bothered at all. And I, so reserved as a person that I didn't even have enough guts in my butts to make friends so quickly. What would if they say NO, we can't be friends with you? I didn't want to be the laughing stock of this school. The setting made me paranoid.

8:00AM. An announcement swiped a sudden wave of discipline in the classroom. Everyone started leaving with their diaries.

"Hey, you don't look concerned at all about the assembly. Ehh?" a chirpy voice asked.

He was Rahul, the first guy I came across. He was a dark and handsome *jaatt* boy, as tall as a Lakers basketball player.

"No, actually I don't have a diary with me. I am a newcomer in this school", I mumbled pretending to be innocent.

"By the way, I am Aarav" I said, finally with a smile moving my hand towards him.

"Hi, I am Rahul, prefect of 8thstandard" he said with pride,

though the last part wasn't so necessary.

"No problem man, our class prefect is from our standard only. I'll tell her about this. Come fast." He assured.

We both left hurriedly. He got lost somewhere. I soon remembered my father's cliché-*beta dost vost sab sath chhor dete hai musibat ke samay*. I could easily strike a chord with my father's philosophies. I was in a hell, and I had no friends here. Surrounded with such crappy thoughts, I started finding where to stand. Finally I recognized a few faces from my class and stood behind them.

The prayer started and I was least interested in anything. The weather was overcast. It seemed that the clouds would start crying anytime to sympathize with me. A few drops were sensed by us on the bare skin. Meanwhile, our class prefect started doing her job. I looked for Rahul around but couldn't find him at all even when he was taller than anyone else standing there. I repeated my father's words in my head.

I could just hear her voice as she started checking from the last lad. I didn't look back at her. She started dragging students out from the queue due to faults like long nails, dirty shoes, missing school belt and tie, or no diary!

Her voice was as soothing as of a nightingale. The moment she came to me, I turned my head upright looking straight at her, she was almost four inches shorter than me, so I looked down into her eyes. A tremor rushed within my muscles which made me realize that they too existed in my body. Those twinkling eyes were trying to ask something but I had no answers at all.

My mouth was left open for next ten seconds. I felt choked and was unable to breathe. She was a rare beauty. She was not too fair, no long hair. A frame of thick-black spectacles covered her beautiful brown eyes. She was as not beautiful as someone descended from heavens but indeed too beautiful to any human eye. She made a pony tail, looked worried, small nose, red lips, a mole signifying her beauty on her lower lip at the left.

Gorgeousness diffused in the air slowly. We both looked at each other. I could not move from my place, my body was almost paralyzed. My heart skipped beats for the first time on seeing a girl. Perhaps because I was standing so close to a girl after such a long time. Lastly I remember I was so close to my first crush in 6th standard. We both tried to kiss for the first time so disastrously that we ended up doing nothing in trepidation, may be because we were not clear about this procreation system of humans. She told me that she'd be pregnant if we kissed for more than five seconds. Those words still strike my chords. Pre-puberty days are the silliest, but the most beautiful days of one's life.

Coming back to my close encounter with a gorgeous girl and my madly beating heart!

She looked at me from my shoes to my hairstyle, very keenly.

Am I looking handsome?

Will she be impressed?

I wouldn't open my mouth, in case I have bad breath.

Oh! I realized she was probably checking for errors.

It was my tendency to get covered with sweat and my body froze whenever someone asked me something looking straight into my eyes. She did the same, perhaps more. She took everything away from me in her first sight. I looked somewhere else to get back to life. It was a batch tucked on her right pocket that exposed her name and designation "Anamika Roy: Prefect XI standard", which I read as 'perfect'.

"Where is your diary, show me your hands" she inquired in her saccharine voice as she looked at my nails.

"Umm…err… actually…" being the most shy personality surviving on this sphere I could only utter this much on facing a divinity like her.

"Oh! That means you don't have it" she said as if she is just going to give the third degree to me for such a minor error. It was such a big school with thousands of students that I even didn't expect her to recognize that I was a new student.

She held my hand to drag me out of the queue and to present me in front of our tough disciplinary in-charge. As soon as she grasped my hand, I sensed something magical which clogged me for next few seconds, it was something 'out of ordinary'.

As soon as she left my hand, the magic broke off, but the sensations remained resonant in me for the following minutes. We both looked at the vault of heaven together, randomly. It drizzled, and then the raindrops instantly gathered speed and volume. I was not yet out of the spell of Miss Perfect, and this captivating natural affair was just too much for me to tolerate. There was a sudden explosion of magnificence around me.

It started raining hard, the monsoon had arrived. I had never found rains any tempting. But this time, I anticipated something new, something better, something drastic, something special and that too for myself.

Leaving every job of hers aside, she hurriedly took her umbrella out from her backpack, standing a few inches away from me. Her hurried hands brushed against my forearms several times. Wasn't her standing beside me not enough to ruin my heart, that she accidentally kept giving my heart reasons to accelerate and finally stop beating? A chaotic situation occurred all around us. The wind had no direction,

so did I. I just looked at her and smiled at what she was doing.

Her hair was too anxious to come out of the lock up of her rubber band and enjoy the bilateral flowing of breeze. She tried to tuck them, simultaneously doing the umbrella job. She looked sweet like honey and innocent like an infant. She did what she liked, leaving everything behind, tried to open her umbrella but the wind whooshed every appreciating attempt made by her. Her face asked for help but she didn't ask for it. She was self-contained too, I concluded. I took the umbrella from her in ease and opened it, looking straight into her eyes. For anyone in the world, it was just another picture-perfect scene but for me it was destiny.

She took the umbrella and ran off like a toddler, laying out a thousand drops with her. She didn't even consider to offer me the umbrella. She was ignorant too, a little less humble, but despite of all that she was totally adorable.

She left, but my eyes refused to leave her sight. She had devastated the peace of my life, the stability was all gone. I was left with nothing but hastened heart beats and a muddled up life.

By the time I gained some awareness of myself and my environs, I was too dripped and almost transparent with my insides, upper ones.

Conserving the exquisite experience of my life, I left for my classroom.

This was the first and last interaction we had for the next one year.

After that I never ever had a conversation with Anamika, except some two or three "excuse me" we shared to clear the way , when she came to our section during break time to meet some of her friends. I saw her quite often, sometimes alone, sometimes with friends and sometimes with me saying "excuse me". Such a poor lad I was if you ask me. I noticed her every time but never had guts to talk to her. Later I stopped doing that and kept myself away from her and her friends. Though I was never close to her, but whatever!

Days lapsed on, in agony of science, my mother compelled me to join some institute for cracking IIT entrance test but I knew what I was capable of, I wanted to be a newsperson. Somehow this year passed with a dozen of question banks and lonesomeness. Soon I started losing contact with my old school friends, even with some of my best friends too. Everything was changing at quite a fast pace. I was not even getting time to think where was I heading to.

Life was going too colorless. No hangouts, no partying, no good friends even. I missed my old buddies like anything. Though we met on some Sundays but that was not even one percent of the fun we used to have together. We all were changing, half the time we spent together, went in making ourselves comfortable with each other. But

somewhere deep inside, we knew we loved and cared for each one.

It's not that I had completely become a book worm. I too lived occasionally. Some good guys always helped and made me realize that I was not all alone.

In the meantime, 11th standard passed, and I had come across many new people who soon had become good friends, good enough to be invited to birthday parties, good enough to go out on trips, good enough to encourage to tell lies at home, good enough to motivate to drink, and good enough to teach you to have a better perspective towards life.

School Days

Birthdays often bring you in limelight and make you feel special. It may be a big day for you, it Is actually, for others around you too, but for totally different reasons. You expect gifts and blessings and birthday wishes, others look out at your pocket. This was going to be one such day.

Officially I was 18 today, legally eligible in few more aspects of life. These were the times when Orkut was murdered by Facebook. These were the times when girls were no more cautious about wearing shorts and skirts that measured just a few inches, openly. These were the times when people preferred Subway over McDonalds and Pizza Hut over Domino's. These were the times when laptops came in hand instead of assembled PCs at home; times when friends were not easily found; times when I missed my old friends during the blank moments of my life. Changes were surrounding me, and more were ready to strike me soon.

But I never knew that this "one more damn year" will alter my approach towards life so melodramatically.

That day, we just had a usual break. I took Rahul, Karan, Oh-shit, I mean Oshit, and Aniket to our canteen, named *Gulshan da adda* by seniors.

We conquered seats for ourselves. Grabbing a seat in his 10X10 dhaba was nothing less that conquering it. I remember my last birthday when a group of twenty students made me stand on a table of surely larger canteen than this and compelled each and every student present there to sing a birthday jingle for me. It indeed was so special. I was missing them badly today. We didn't lose our bonds but we did lose connections, these are two different things if we understand. I managed to put a fake smile in place while ordering G*ulshan's-'special'-thali* for the gluttons. G*ulshan's-'special'-thali* was the only special thing I came across the whole day.

“So what are the plans for today?” Aniket queried.

Aniket was a happy-go-lucky guy, full of zip. People said that we looked like twins, his build-up, complexion and even way of interaction was equivalent to me to some extent. The thing I loved about him was his straight-forward attitude, but still he wasn’t a very dear friend.

“Nothing much. Just an evening with some friends, then dinner with family. That’s it” I replied unconcernedly. By the time the *Jaatt* boys Oshit and Rahul were busy sucking their respective cocks, oh cokes I mean. Their hands were fully dripped with Daal and Sabzi but no matter what, they were enjoying every sip of it.

We were just left with ten more minutes for the break, but Karan the foodie demanded for more. He was a fatso, with brains but no skill to utilize it. He lived with one aim, that’s joining some good engineering college. His parents actually dreamed of it, he as just a victim, bless the child my lord.

“Hey just get me one more coke and a grilled sandwich”.

“One for me too!”

“Hmmm, okay”.

That’s all I could have said. It was a birthday treat after all, and in that case if you don’t even have fifty pence in your pocket for going home, you’ll prefer to feed your epicurean mates first. But, whatever I had money, so it was just an example here.

“Here it is. Anything else guys?” Another tragedy is even if you’re penniless now, you’ll still utter this statement with pride for sure and this is not just an example, my pockets HAD run dry.

“Anything else guys?”

Though a ‘yes’ from anyone would have bled dry all the pride in me but as I said this is the tragedy. I sat down with a thought “Finally, the party is over”.

“Hey guys! The notice is out for this year’s school trip. Aarav are you coming with us to Manali?” Aniket quizzed again in anticipation, giving stress to his last word, as if it would change my ‘no’ to a ‘yes, why not’.

I turned my eyes straight at him, guzzling my coke and the bell rang, signifying the end of the break. I went back to the counter and paid for the meals. My reply remained pending for the time being.

We went back to our class, climbing the stairs quickly.

I saw Anamika there, still tittering with her mates Sunaina and Shanaya.

‘They must have told her about my birthday’ I said to myself in eagerness of being wished by her.

We went straight to them as the teacher wasn’t there. Anamika and Shanaya were still giggling on some of their silly-girlish-issues.

They were a big group of friends but I was still not a permanent member on their frequent outings.

“Hey here comes the birthday boy”, Sunaina said in a jovial tone, still not wishing me, the shiver in my body went on and on after that, my hands all sweaty in nervousness, just because Anamika too stood there, and guess what ‘smiling at me’. Her brown eyes looked so deep and beautiful without her specs. I had an amazingly awkward eye contact with her, amazing for me, and perhaps awkward for her.

“Thanks”, I uttered in excitement of standing beside her. To be frank, I could see nobody around us that very moment, my all focus was shifted on her now. I don’t know but she always did something to attract people. By attraction, I don’t mean seduction. She was not sensual. She was angelic, simple, yet exceptionally beautiful.

“But I haven’t wished you yet”, all girls giggled on this out-of-my-range joke by Sunaina. I mean why do girls do this time, they utter something silly and laugh alone at it, strange. Or maybe this wasn’t that strange, it WAS one of my MEMs, a product of my own occasional clumsiness.

Sunaina was a total chatter box, she never kept shut even if she was not a part of ongoing conversation. Giving advices, taking advices and asking countless questions was the only thing was she was familiar with, average by looks but still sweet and spicy. To sum it up, she was Aniket’s girlfriend.

“Happy birthday Aarav”, Anamika said, sitting on the table of bench and taking my soul, my breath, my everything. She raised her hand, no, not to slap me, but to wish me. In a moment, I swallowed. The adrenaline gushed through me and my hands became sweaty. I hesitated in touching her beautiful hands with my filthy sweaty ones. But I couldn’t just ignore. We shook hands, while Shanaya sat on the seat in a very seductive posture, crossing her legs and her extremely short skirt was giving a full view of her insides. Every next guy was staring at her with widened eyes and a drooping tongue. Though, I stared at them once for some microseconds only, Anamika being the reason. Otherwise, I would have just umm…well, leave it.

Shanaya had unbearable sexy legs with some good influencing curves, not very fair skinned, typical of an Asian. An easily noticeable layer of makeup highlighted her heart shaped face and made her cheek bones more prominently visible.

“Hmmm . . Thanks Ana .. “ I tried to thank her but the teacher entered our class. Chaos occurred all around for settling down. It was our physics teacher Manju Kharbanda who shouted like hell even when talking normally. Hence, the students preferred not to give her any chance to pump-up our ear drums.

She taught some magnetism thing that day. I just remembered one

magnetic attraction in the world. I was the magnetic material whose all domains were now aligned in the direction of the girl who was now moving out of my sight.

Anamika and Shanaya left for their classes. I saw Anamika smiling, looking back at … at I don't know. We all were almost standing together but I took that for me and I smiled too.

Too insignificant for her, for anyone, but for me, it was our second interaction omitting those silly "excuse me", a notable affair. My accelerated heartbeats became normal soon.

"Mr. Aarav, would you please enlighten the class on ferromagnetism?" A chihuahua barked and shook me out of Anamika's thoughts suddenly. Oops! That was my physics teacher.

I just stood up and looked here and there for help. In a moment, the giant Chihuahua, almost poked my nose as she barely reached my shoulder despite her high heel footwear. I had started admiring short people, girls especially.

"You are constantly smiling in my class, and not paying attention, would you jus…"

"Ma'am, it's his birthday today", the whole bunch of my new friends screamed to my rescue.

"Oh, so the birthday boy gets the privileges today", the Chihuahua uttered and smiled. I just smiled as I had no idea about how to react. The bell rang and I heaved a sigh of relief. I couldn't concentrate on magnetism that day. On anything! The HAPPY BIRTHDAY AARAV in that saccharine voice kept echoing in my ears throughout the day, and the soft clutch of her hand remained live and fresh enough to keep me occupied forever.

The needles of clock rolled at their pace. We crammed the course outline. Exams came and went by. It was now high time for sincere IIT aspirants to kick some ass, quit our co-curricular activities, and study like geeks.

Final exams of 11^{th} standard were now over. It was the result day. We already knew our marks, but school staff doesn't usually get satisfied by humiliating the students by giving them the checked answer sheets full of two concentric circles in the name of marks. So, our parents were called all at once for more public humiliation. I had scored a satisfactory seventy percent, satisfactory for me and everyone else around me, while Aniket flunked in two and Rahul in one. Sunaina had managed to clear all surprisingly, and talking about the toppers-Anamika had topped her batch leaving the geeks behind with a ninety one percent. Hats off! She's single, my mind declared. If she wasn't, then it wouldn't have been possible for her to score so well. My illogical theory pleased me.

This was the day when I saw her parents for the first time. I

entered the classroom early with mom, not expecting many people at that time. I wanted to avoid any kind of MEMs thrown to me by my family members. But unfortunately, all great minds had thought alike. Almost all my classmates were there in the room. I hurried to grab my mark-sheet and leave the room as early as possible. Opportunely, my mother didn't protest. As I stepped out, I saw Anamika with her parents.

A typical Bengali couple. Her mom was wearing her off-white sari in old-fashioned Bengali style, perfectly draped; and a big red bindi on her forehead slightly above the normal, signifying her total devotion towards the culture. Her father seemed completely comfortable in a shirt-trouser combo, quitting their traditional costume, *loongi-kurta*. He was a handsome man. Anamika had got the eyes of her mother and the cute little nose from her father. She was the perfect blend of the best features of both of them. Their humble attitude towards everyone they came across was the only thing that Anamika hadn't acquired from them.

I tried to put Anamika on view to my mother just in anxiety of knowing her opinion about her. I wondered why I even tried to do this.

"Mom, our school topper, Anamika", I said pointing my finger towards her and deliberately avoiding to speak out her full name signifying her Bengali belongingness, as my mother-a typical orthodox lady, has prejudices against all the *flesh eating homo sapiens*. I waited for my mother to react on that but she completely ignored everything said making a face "Why you're not the topper of the batch?"

I thanked myself for not having told her Anamika's full name. Being the topper of the class was enough to sow a seed of prejudice against her in my mother's mind, as if Anamika had cunningly taken away what was supposed to be mine- the topper's position.

"Let's go", she ordered and I nodded.

"So how was your result son?" my dad asked anticipating something out of the ordinary.

"Must have flunked in two or three or maybe four, no one flunks in ED", Vaibhavi shrugged. She was first-born in our family, a girl with long and sharp nails. I was compelled to give her some respect, though sometimes she truly deserved to be respected but at the same time she deserved some kick offs too for her never-ending dominance over me.

"I got a seventy percent," I said in pride.

"Show me", she snatched the report card from my hands in disbelief. I really like it when people don't expect something good from me and I bang it in their faces.

"70%? It's a 69.3%, exaggeration of percentage is not key to

success", she said attacking my dignity. Her long nails shined from behind my mark-sheet and I sat on the sofa silently murmuring to myself.

"It's ok, it is not a big deal, when you'll pass out from IIT or DCE as a successful engineer, it'll shut her up", my dad said with a smile and a dream in his eyes. I could barely sense that anyone else at home had this dream in their eyes.

Next few weeks passed in the hullabaloo of the Manali trip. No twelfth-ie was expected to miss the trip. My own inane theory and the idea of *no one missing the trip* encouraged me to plunge into the plan.

Finally we had some holidays to relish ourselves.

I hallucinated and daydreamed about the trip as it finally arrived.

Lack of guts in my butts-1

My sister was totally exaggerating my departure and the four day trip. Over-protective is what you can call her. I was getting lectures from everyone in the house on various significant things-about the way I should behave during the journey, about my behavior with others, about the cold weather in Manali, about the whereabouts of my undies in my bag, how significant!

Phone rang, calling me back to life from the kingdom of dreams. I gazed at my landline phone tring tring-ing, expecting someone to pick it up. But everyone was busy doing nothing and me, the lazy bone had to receive the call. It was Akshay.

"Hey, get up, pack up and I'll be there at 4:00pm sharp in my new Skoda fabia", he said underlining the words 'skoda fabia'. He was a loudmouth. Hence, he was not a very good friend of mine, just another classmate.

"Ok, don't worry. I'll be all set ASAP", and click. I hung up.

I tried to go back to sleep but I couldn't, some excitement was on now.

I was getting ready for the final showdown, smearing some hair gel and drizzling deodorant around.

It was 3:30 only and Akshay managed to come so early. I was ready though but still I accused him for fun.

"Hey man, so early, you were supposed to arrive at 4:00pm in your 'skoda fabia', but I see it has undergone some drastic transformation", I taunted, unable to see his buggy.

"Sorry brother, actually I have to collect my Armani jacket from a friend, and my dad was not yet home, so I hurriedly brought my Maruti 800 'AC'."

Such a blabbermouth he was I told you, reasons were all geared up and the pride was still on. How can one show-off with a Maruti 800, but people like him can, highlighting the word 'AC'.

I turned to my house to pull out my baggage and came out with

my mom and a diabolic sister.

"Take care and don't be a scamp over there", Vaibhavi said as if I was the only troublemaker left on this sphere.

We left, exchanging 'byes and take cares'.

Akshay's maruti 800 'AC' was more like an electric heater and the sun outside was scorching us. All hair gels, fair and handsome and expensive deodorants seemed useless.

Everyone was escorted according to their groups in front of school reception. Our group had almost our own separate bus. Twenty members were there I guess, though I was conversant to only six of them. We parked the car in school parking arena and headed towards reception with the luggage.

I saw Aniket, Karan and Sunaina standing together with their bags and giggling.

"Hey, here comes the man", Aniket shouted. He was looking good, let us not talk about intellectual things in his case.

"Hey man, ready to rock?" I said adding a fake laugh. I myself was not ready to rock, but my mood cannot compensate 5000 bucks I had paid for being here. So I had to behave like this, maintaining the ready-to-rock look on my face!

"Yo man! Now c'mmon, hurry up, gotta grab the last seats", Karan said at his full excitement level like a small kid going for his first ever school picnic. As I entered the reception area, tons of "hi's" welcomed me.

At the same time Shanaya entered the reception, and the boys followed her with the same gesture-widened eyes and a drooping tongue. She was wearing a black tank top and a blue denim extremely-short shorts, with a pendent and two giant bangles as accessories.

"Oh fuck! She holds a tattoo on her back, sexo man look look look!" Karan whispered in my ear as she hugged Sunaina. His number of 'look-s' provoked me to look at her more intently than ever. She was hot indeed. It was making me horny, a low-grade-male-tendency if you ask me. I looked some place or other but she came to me now, all of a sudden.

"Hiiiiii Aarav", she said stretching her 'hi' to infinity and leaned forward to hug me, before I could understand anything we had already shared a half-hug.

"Hi", I said meekly trying to avoid eye-contact.

She held my hand and said "let's go guys".

Now what was that? I asked to myself while the three assholes shared

wicked smiles. Aniket winked at me as I tossed her arm away gently. For guys at school, it was an honor for them to even share words with Shanaya, then why the hell did I refuse her dazzling arm?

Five of us took our bags and headed towards our bus number five. Rahul and O-shit accompanied us, with the same "hi's and hugs".

"O-SHIT", we all said in chorus and chuckled, while Oshit gave a sheepish look. They were nice guys and an important part of the group, Our group.

We entered our bus. It was a two-by-two bus. Rahul already grabbed the last seat in turmoil with Oshit, Rahul and Karan. It was obvious that Aniket and Sunaina, the dying-for-love mates will seize the front two-seaters.

Left, me and Shanaya. She sat alone on the seat beyond Aniket and Sunaina, giving me a come-here-sit-here look. To avoid pre-mature ejaculation publicly, I distracted myself from her legs and sat on the seat adjacent to her with a small corridor to Aniket and Sunaina.

They gave me why-the-hell-are-you-sitting-here type of look. They wanted some private time, I concluded. Troubled by different looks I decided to look outside the window, my earphones plugged in. Everyone started pulling out their Ipods, while Oshit took out his grandpa's time's old-fashioned transistor kind of a thing. He too brought some cassettes to flaunt. To be honest, he was shit!

I leaned my head on the window and looked outside at the falling leaves, it was a bright sunny day. Aniket and Sunaina were already lost in each other while the back-seaters started throwing a dozen of PJ's and hooted on their own. I knew that it was going to happen. People will get busy, but I still came missing my physics week at the insti. I don't know what brought me here.

All of a sudden a kid entered the bus and sat with Shanaya. His tongue was also drooping down on seeing his 'to-be-partner-for-sixteen-hours.'

All of a forthwith a car stopped in front of the bus, turning everyone around at it. I was unable to see clearly who the hell was in. I turned away in disinterest. Meanwhile Sunaina screamed "Oh! Here she is!" defeating the surround sound of my ear-plugs. Her loud voice made me look at 'her'.

"Oh my my Anamika Roy she is", I bawled within. A glimpse of her and tendency of my heart was to skip beats and finally come to a halt.

Anamika Roy! One thing I need to confess is that, she was looking *damsel in distress*. Her untied not-so-long hair successfully hid half of her face. Some locks of her silken curtain of hair lied down in ease on her right shoulder. She looked a bit confused. She was busy finding

something in her hand bag standing right next to the door of bus. She was looking pretty of course. May be her untied hair, may be the sunshine on her bare hands, may be her glittering earrings, may be her petite figure in that purple spaghetti and mud-shade cargo shorts. It might be anything but I was unable to make out, that why my eyes got stuck on her. I was trying hard but failed to disconnect with that aura. My eyes anxiously waited to see her complete face.

My i-pod was doing its job, my earphones were plugged. One in my hand and other was lying down on my lap with the i-pod. And out of the blues, Jay Sean was singing words of my mind "got my eyes on you". Perfect timing!

The tour manager closed the doors. But she still managed to stand there, finding something in her magic bag.

Then a call from Sunaina, her hands waving in air signaling our whereabouts, drew her attention to us, to them actually. She smiled and told Sunaina to wait for a minute using her finger, the index one. She dropped her bag down on front seat and started tying her hair. Her skin seemed soft and silky, just like melting chocolate. I was in the same pose from past five minutes, from the moment she stepped in. I stretched my back to maximum to get a full view of hers. It started aching but all of it was overpowered by her elegance. I didn't even try to resist myself from doing that. I wanted to see her. A year it had been, I had never looked at her for so long. The same moment I was ready to fall for her, my heart was consistently skipping beats.

By the time she finished her business. In next ten seconds she was standing beside me, sharing 'hi's' in typical girlish manner with Sunaina and Shanaya. I combed my hair using my fingers, cleaned sweat on my face using with my t-shirt's sleeve and smelled my armpits constantly to check if I'm not smelling bad. I prepared myself to give a shot.

The fact, and indeed the most amazing fact was that-in the whole damn bus only I was the one sitting alone and she was standing, and there is a long sixteen hour journey to go. But random and disgusting thoughts were rushing through my mind. What if she sits at back shifting someone else with me, what if she convinces the 'lucky kid' sitting with Shanaya to join me at the back, what if she denies sitting with me in front of whole bus!

Then I plugged in my earphones back in style showing some attitude and maintained who-the-hell-are-you look on my face. I had learned somewhere-don't ever make the girls feel that you are going crazy for them. Wait for a while, show some attitude and wait till they approach you back. But at the same time I thought that may be this was the reason why I was single from past so many years. I looked at her only from the corner of my right eye, cleverly so that no one could

catch me at all.

I switched off my media player, but still kept plugged in just to show I'm not hearing anything. But now, I could hear everything they were talking about.

"*Yarr*, you sit here with Aarav, we will keep swapping after some time, and we are almost sitting together naa", Sunaina advised Anamika, while she shook her head. My heart started beating fast.

"Hi", Anamika said suddenly turning towards me with no smile. That's what we call a bad start. Unfortunately I was smelling my armpit at the point, when she turned towards me, a bad bad start! My heart accelerated. I knew she was talking to me but still I managed to keep looking outside, actually outside this time to gesture as if I have not seen her looking at me in that "smelling-the-bad odor-armpits" posture.

"Excuse me?" she said again and left furiously. Now the time had come to hold grudges against myself. She went straight to Shanaya and somehow convinced that kid to join me. I felt all washed up. My fake stud attitude fucked me all the way.

I was gnashing my teeth in anger. I had no option else being remorseful for the whole journey. The boy came to me with a playstation in his hands and a packet of chips in style.

"I want the window seat", the kid ordered. He was barely four feet in height and probably twelve years old, the puberty-kid I named him.

"What? What did you just say", I questioned in a way to terrify him.

"Are you deaf or what? I think the girl was right", he said as my eyes widened.

"Girl? What did she say, which girl?" I inquired.

"Ya, that girl in purple, dumb and deaf you are is what she said. Now I think she's right" he clarified pointing towards Anamika. My eyes widened even more.

'There you go! Now show your pathetic attitude you sucker' I said to myself, taking it as a deep matter of insult. I calmed down and told the kid to manage for a few hours and shut the fuck up! He sat next to me playing some 'need for speed' and munching the chips concurrently. I plugged in again, this time switching to Pankaj Udas, his surname clearly defining my state of mind.

Half an hour passed. I rolled my eyes. Aniket and Sunaina were in the same cuddling posture. My classmates in the last row were busy yelling shit!

Shanaya-Anamika busy gossiping, puberty-kid still munching without offering me and the rest kids jumping and umm…well, they were jumping only.

“Why are you looking at that girl? Just because she has horrendously hot and sexy legs?” He suddenly asked, leaving me in a state of shock. How could a just-entering-in-puberty kid have uttered such words.

“What? Are you nuts boy? Should I tell your teacher about this”, I tried to petrify him.

“Should I tell that girl now?” he said as he almost stood up to tell Shanaya, petrifying me even more badly. I pulled him down and apologized.

“Oh oh oh . Calm down boy”, I said.

“Okay then tell me the truth”, he interrogated.

“Okay okay! See I’m not looking at her actually, I’m looking at the girl sitting adjacent to her” I simplified.

“The purple one?”

“Ya, the purple one” I made it clear this time.

“But she doesn’t have sexy legs like the black one” he said. He has already entered puberty I concluded. Such a horny kid he was I tell you, looking at Shanaya more intently than anyone else.

“Look kid, I’m not looking at anyone’s legs, just looking at the purple one just because, umm… I don’t know”, I said a bit confused.

“But why? Do you like her?”, he fired another question.

“Don’t you think you are asking too much kid. Eh?” I winced.

“Don’t you want to sit with her” He was smart, I concluded.

“So can you help me in that?” my left eyebrow lifted upwards automatically.

“If you want me to!”

“Okay then, let it be the case” I said to finalize the step.

“But.” he smiled wickedly.

“What but?” I said, now my both eyebrows lifted upwards.

“You have to introduce me to that girl in black.”

I told you he was totally a horny crap.

“Have you hit the puberty kid? It sounds like you’re having a crush on her” I asked with a laugh.

“Dude I whack off three times a day, so better shut up!” Now, THAT left me traumatized. He was orgiastic too. He seemed to have hit puberty at the time of their birth itself.

“What the hell!”. I uttered in reflex.

“No it feels like heaven! Aahh..” Now this left me giggling wickedly.

“Okay okay I’ll do that for you. But what will you do after that?” I asked coming back to the point, still unable to control the chuckle.

“Leave the rest on me” he said, as if he would make her whack off his nut-sized dick. Ass!

He went straight to the girls. I was nervous. What he’s going to

do?

He murmured something folding his hands, just like if he's pleading. No matter what, I wanted Anamika. I saw, she stood up as the kid sat there, oh my god! Fifteen hours straight with Anamika! A shiver again ran through my body seeing her approach me.

Super-kid, I changed his name.

Finally Anamika came to me. I welcomed her with a smile. She gave nothing back and sat down feebly.

"Ahem ahem" I cleared my throat. It worked. She looked at me but expressionless. I looked at her from the corner of my eye again. All I could see was that she opened her bag and pulled out the things. She had almost everything in that handbag, a comb came out first, then the gloss and finally a chewing gum.

"Do you want to have one?" She said all of a sudden. I was taken aback by her abrupt approach, giving my eyes no time to recover. I spun them somehow but I think she saw me looking at her with a naked-eye.

"No thanks, I mean thank you", I murmured. My voice was unable to reach out properly, it got stuck somewhere in the throat. She turned back to her magic bag. She took out her comb and started combing her hair, almost leaning on me. She was tilted in a way that her bare shoulders were pushing my covered ones. Sweaty hands, shivers and tremors were on. I tried to pull myself back and I succeeded. What was that now? The girl I dreamt of was not even inches away, almost lying on me, and I pulled back? What the heck? What's wrong with me Oh Almighty?

"Oh sorry . . I just", she apologized for making me paralyzed.

"It's okay", I muttered adding a smile. She was still expressionless. I was not one of those flirtatious lads who'd never miss chances like this.

The time rolled on. We sat quietly for next few minutes. I saw that super-kid busy harassing Shanaya. His hand was completely on her bare left leg. Lucky-horny chap! Just using his innocent looks coolly, in the skin of his chronological age. I should learn some tips from him rather than sitting like a loser here.

It was 7:30 now, an hour sitting with her and we had shared 'sorry' and 'thank you' yet. Shameless, the kid had touched her whole body in past one hour, almost whole body. I regretted my childhood, spent in playing with cars and useless toys.

We had reached 'Haveli' now, GT karnal road, most famous places one would like to hang on for hours, mostly famous for its food. Buffet was organized for us. Every one yawned and stretched as we stepped out. It was pleasant outside. Anamika covered herself with a black stole and left casually. Everyone moved towards the garden area for

dinner, some went to pee, some to smoke and people like Aniket and Sunaina went for the swings present in the lawn. Cool breeze was flowing, perfect weather for paramours.

Soon everyone started making up a queue like beggers for dinner plates. Food was mouthwatering indeed. I too joined Karan, Oshit and Rahul in the queue. They were still bellowing shit out!

My eyes swayed to look for Anamika, but I couldn't see her. The dinner got over in fifteen minutes. We had dessert. Aniket and Sunaina still not bothered about the dinner. Hungry love you see!

"Hey Aarav, come lets gather everyone. We'll sit together here on the grass", Karan shrieked.

"Okay, you try and disturb Aniket-Sunaina. I'll be back in a moment", I said.

"But where?" he asked.

I showed him my little finger, demonstrating that I was going to pee. I wondered, who the hell created these weird symbols, excellent job though!

I went through the garden area crossing the ice-cream parlor. I saw a board comprising a male figure with words 'GENTS' written below. I followed the path. I looked around to witness some flora and fauna, then my eyes trundled and I saw a familiar girl sitting alone on a table for four. I went a bit further. She was Anamika. All alone. The place was only lit up essentially, bushes all around. I supposed that it was specially made for cozy lovers. I thought the place wasn't meant for her, especially when she was the only one sitting there. So, I headed towards her crossing over a few shrubs. Skipping the idea of not peeing wasn't very good though.

"Hey Anamika, what brought you here dear? Come, let's join the group. Did you have dinner by the way?" I wondered where the words came from! I was learning from the super-kid, I guess.

"No it's okay, you go, I'll be there" she said as she wiped off some moisture from her eyes. I went closer.

What was the matter? I asked to myself. I haven't done anything stupid. Why is she crying?

"Hey what happened? Why are you crying?" I questioned, "Missing mummy huh?" I questioned and added a fake smile, assuming that smiles are contagious. But all went in vain with my lame 'missing-mummy' joke.

"No, nothing like that. You go na, don't spoil your moment" she said in a sweet quivering voice wiping off another tear. It just took out my soul. It was a serious matter I concluded. Should I interfere? I asked myself again.

"Well, I won't intervene in this against your will. All I wanna say is that crying is not the solution to any problem, you can just figure

out the solution more easily with the beautiful smile you have", I said with a smirk, appreciating my efforts at being flirtatious for the first time ever. I finally tried to score!

She looked at me with a bead of moisture in her eye and finally forced a smile on her innocent little face. "Thanks Aarav, this really means a lot to me", she finally said with a genuine smile that lit up her face. I was lost in the beauty of her eyes. Angelic sloe eyes she had. I realized I was staring at her like some amatory admirer. So, I distracted myself.

"See, dumb and deaf people can make you smile too", I said with a half-smile and she laughed finally.

"Can make you laugh also", I tried to continue the praised sentence, not praised anymore.

"Oh I'm really sorry for that Aarav, please don't mind" she said, adding the prettiest smile one could ever witness.

"It's okay, no grudges at all, it happens" I said humbly. "So, shall we go now?" I uttered.

"Sorry but I'm not at all in a mood to join anyone now. You can go Aarav. I'm really okay here" she said switching back to the mood she had just quit.

"By the way, did that kid say something about me?"

"Yep, he told me that you're a child beater", she said.

"What me? Child beater?" my mouth hung open at the false allegations.

"And a porn hoarder too! He said you'd wreck his mind by your dirty talks and all, so he needs to shift at some other place. He almost begged", she said as my face was turning red.

"But I don't think so. You look so innocent", she said putting some ice on my temper.

"He's a liar Anamika. I haven't even watched a single porn movie yet in my eighteen years. What exactly is a porn movie by the way?" Now that's what you call overacting. I had uttered something really questionable. The number was countless in actuality.

She laughed hard "Don't overdo it Aarav, Gotcha!"

"He just did that because he wanted to sit with Shanaya and I wanted .. " I stopped. "What did you want?" she asked, looking at me with questioning eyes.

I felt a lump in my throat, "and I wanted him to leave if he wanted. So he used me I guess. Such a horny kid I tell you", I clarified.

"Ya, he also said that you're horny too", she added and stuck out her tongue.

"He's such an ass", I said in annoyance. I wanted to add that 'whack off-three times a day' thing but somehow I controlled.

"Hey he's just a kid! Leave it. He must be just fooling us. I know

you're not like that", she said and smiled. I was totally flattered. Her smile was well back in place, and I was loving the way she claimed her trust in me.

The asshole-kid, I changed his name again!

Five minutes passed in silence. Five minutes sound less but they seem like five hours, when sitting with someone silently.

"You know what you're really so dumb", she said with a smile finally breaking up the silence. She was extrovert.

"But why?" I too smiled in shock.

"A girl is sitting all alone with you, such a pleasant weather, no one around and you didn't ask me for a coffee yet".

What was that now? Does she like my company? I was totally bolted from the blues by that. I stood up keeping the silence alive from my side and went to the counter of the cafeteria. I ordered two cappuccinos, waited for a few minutes and served in front of her. The weather was going as pleasant as our meeting.

"Now?" I said as I sipped the coffee.

"Hmm the coffee is good", she smiled and sipped, trying to divert my point.

"I'm talking about that dumb thing Anamika", I said as I tore the additional sugar packet looking intently at the cute little moustache made on her upper lip by the creamy cappuccino.

"You're not dumb anymore, coffee is good", she said laughed at her private joke. I never understand what girls say and then laugh hard on it, strange. We sipped our coffees looking at the bushes and shared smiles after every few seconds. Time passed in silent smiles.

"Oh! Oh! Oh! Something fishy going on?" Sunaina screamed all of sudden from bushes. Before we could have recovered from that, Aniket, Karan, Oshit, Rahul, Shanaya and even the asshole-kid joined them and hooted. I looked at Anamika, she was laughing too.

I too joined the chuckle, but at the same time, gave a terrorizing look to the kid and he replied with a wink and a smile.

"Nothing like that guys", Anamika clarified.

"Okay shut that! I think we should leave, we're getting late I guess", I said as I stood up. Everyone followed giggling.

"Going great sir!" Asshole-kid said as he elbowed me in the rib and ran to Shanaya showing me a tongue. Too girly a gesture if you ask me.

We boarded the bus. Fortunately no one obstructed with the current seating plan, fourteen hours with Anamika, heaven!

We both sat together again. She asked for the window seat and I said 'yes why not' without any hesitation. I remember the look I gave to the asshole-kid when he asked for it. Actually that is the difference.

We headed towards our next and final destination-Manali.

Windows of bus were all wide open. Chilly and ruffled breeze was flowing all round, whooshing up our hairstyles. Girls were a bit concerned but everyone was loving that. A long highway road, full of darkness. The whole bus was quiet except some naughty hyper-active complan kids. Oshit played some old Kishore Kumar tracks, *Dil kya karey, jab kisi ko kisi se pyaar ho jaaye…., ek ajnabii haseena se yu mulaqaat ho gayi…* It was just a lovely ambiance. Oshit you're no more a shit!

But one question still burdened my heart-why was Anamika crying? The reason? But I dared not to put her lovely smile at risk again. So, I remained silent about it.

I eyeballed at Anamika, gazing outside the window. She covered her body with a black stole, specs in hand, hair tied stiffly, but still some strands were swinging over her face due to bilateral course of wind. She was not even trying to tuck them at back of her ear, as most girls do. I thought of doing that for her. Would she slap me? Or would she smile likewise we see in Bollywood movies. I dropped that idea in confusion.

She closed her twinkling eyes in a while, a typical Bengali beauty. Sharp features, sweet voice and countless thoughts running through her mind!

I just looked at her, pretending as if I was looking outside. I could not move my eyeballs, they were stuck onto her. People may call it staring at a girl, but I call it a rare bond between my eyes and her beauty.

Hours passed, she slept in the same posture. I looked for a moment across. Everybody was asleep. Even Aniket –Sunaina, holding hands, Sunaina resting her head on Aniket's shoulder in a romantic way. Sounds of loud snoring could be heard from the back. It was 11:30 by my watch. I decided to close my eyes finally.

I heard someone sobbing. I opened my eyes and looked around. It was Anamika again, her eyes were still closed but tears were rolling down. She was shivering.

"Hey Anamika what happened, please don't cry", I tried to console her. I was too bad at consoling. Her quiver went louder.

I thought of wiping off those falling pearls from her eyes. I dropped the idea quickly!

I just had no idea what to do. I stupidly asked "Is something wrong?"

An inner voice answered my question- No, she's trying to see if she can produce sufficient saline water to flood Manali. Idiot I was!

She thankfully ignored my poor attempt and continued weeping.

"Please don't cry", my voice almost broke.

She finally looked at me. Perhaps I looked pretty funny. I don't

care, atleast it brought a sudden smile on her face, though for a fraction of a second.

“I’ll be fine”, she said as she tried to smile and at the same time a tear dropped down again from her glittering eyes. It was such a rare moment that one could witness. She wiped off her tears with her pink hanky, pink and girls!

She held my hand and closed her eyes again. Now this was something beyond special. No shiver went through my body this time, no sweat covers all around my body. May be just because my body was totally paralyzed, my senses went off. I felt nothing, my heart forgot skipping beats.

I held her hand tightly. It was perfect silence all around. Everyone was wheezing. Winds had no direction. I remembered the time when I saw her first glimpse, a year back, and she was as beautiful as then. She slept weeping. I tried to sleep but her hand was still held firmly in my palms. Now our hands started getting sweaty, time to disconnect.

Lack of guts in my butts-2

We reached Manali next morning. Karan woke me up idiotically. I opened my eyes in fuss. I saw no one, but the driver of our bus. He was continuously mocking at me to get off as the bus was parked in the middle of the road. Karan shrugged my shoulders to call me back to life. I looked around, all seats were empty. I think I slept hard that night.

I moved my eyes to look for Anamika but she was not there. I wondered if she would be fine now or would be crying again.

The driver screamed as we stepped out. We lifted up our luggage and headed towards the hotel. Me, Karan and Aniket had to share the same room.

“Oh my goodness! Look at that! What a view!” Karan shouted at his best as we entered our room in the hotel. I stepped forward to accompany Karan at the window.

The shade of the snow covered mountains had covered the little town. The dim sunlight sparkled against the peaks. The evergreen conifer trees swayed in the cool breeze, perhaps welcoming us. Narrow roads paved their way like a snake through the mountains. I gazed at the horizon. The mountains seemed to have touched the sky. Clouds were not as high. They played near the summit and seemed darker than the snow.

My eyes were affixed at the sight. I couldn’t say anything in admiral of the heavenly scene I had just seen. I closed my eyes to lock it up in my mind. Karan started clicking pictures. I felt too peaceful to jump in for pictures. So, I simply claimed a corner of the bed and lied down.

Aniket’s phone buzzed. Sunaina informed us that Shanaya, Anamika and she herself were sharing the room.

“So, Anamika is not a solitary reaper at least”, I talked within. Finally some news about Anamika made me feel relaxed.

Three of us lied down straight on the bed. Our asses were

cracking like an old piece of furniture.

It was 3:00 pm, someone knocked our door badly, forcing us to get up.

“Who the fuck is that?” Aniket moaned in deep slumber. The knock continued as we decide to ignore it as nobody was ready to stand up and look, lazy asses!

We pushed Karan off the bed, he had no choice but to open the door.

“Anamika”, he said. I got up as quick as I never did before in my span of eighteen years. The reflex was so quick that I could not even sense that I had stepped on Aniket’s face for once until he accused me of it, and threatened me to churn my balls the way his face was churned. I paid no heed to the mutt and went off the bed to see her.

“Hi”, she said.

Karan patted my back and hid behind the door as I held the door half open.

“Hi”, I replied with a smile. “How are you now? Umm… what happened?” I questioned.

“I’m good. Just came to see you”, she said, leading me to unconsciousness.

What? See me? Me? I asked myself before asking the same to her.

“Everyone else is pretty occupied with something or the other and err…I needed someone who could listen to me” she said as Karan giggled from behind the door and finally left us alone. I was still unaware of what was happening to me.

“Oh sorry… I mean… ya sure”, I said confusingly as I moved out, smashing the door quickly in response.

“I think it would have been better if you’d have come in something tolerable”, she said.

“What?” I asked shaking my head in confusion.

“Actually your boxers are quiet funny, with this micky mouse stuff on it”, she said as I looked down. In hubbub I forgot to put on my jeans, and THAT was utterly embarrassing if you ask me.

We both shared a chuckle as I left to change.

We walked down the banks of Beas river, the one and only river that flows across the Kullu-Manali hills.

We went down on the rocky plains, so close to the river Beas. The stream of water could be sensed easily from there. A loud gushing voice roared in our ears as if it commanded us to leave the nature undisturbed. Wind was bilateral and Anamika’s hair rambled with the wind. We walked and admired the beauty of the setting.

“So? Why did you call me up out here? Is there anything important you want to talk about?” I asked, wondering if my words sounded rude. I wondered if she would start her conversation with her

most used phrase *nothing like that*.

"No, nothing like that", she began. I unfolded the collar of my T-shirt in self-appreciation on having made the correct guess. She gave a weird look at my unexplained gesture which made me pull down my collar and behave nicely.

"Please continue", I said avoiding an eye contact due to embarrassment. Perhaps I heard a giggle.

"I just wanted to say sorry for yesterday. I was literally exhausted. So I uttered whatever came to my mind. I should not have bothered you with my problems. And then I didn't even tell you the reason that was bothering me. I just can't share it, hope you won't mind. I am just so sorry for being a pest last night, I'm just… so sorry", she said looking down.

"Umm…No no nothing like that", I said as I added a slight laugh.

"Shut up", she said in a typical girly accent.

"Well, I don't think I was *bothered*", I stressed on the word. "In fact, I was extremely pleased that I could be of use to anyone on this planet." I gave her a smile and she returned a grin. I looked at the unending sky and muttered, "I am no more a useless shit mum" Now I felt I was overdoing it. Anamika winced at me to accuse me of my disastrous overacting.

She laughed hard at 'The Embarrassed Aarav.'

We stood facing each other now. I looked straight into her happy eyes which were still affected by the fascinating smile on her face.

"I'd always love to help you out Anamika. Whether you want me or not, I will be there", I don't know where the courage and the words came from, but I said it straight to her, looking into her shiny dark brown eyes.

"You know what?" She said looking at me, as I looked down at her pink slippers now. I was expecting some abuses to shower on me after those 'too much' lines.

"What?" I said in a low tone.

"You're just so good. I mean it feels extremely good to be with you. Even without being a close friend of mine, the ease with which you helped me in getting out of this, I am really thankful to you for that", she appreciated. I high-fived myself.

"I guess these instances make strangers 'good friends'", I said stressing on last words. I was learning to talk. No credits to the asshole kid this time, I was a kinesthetic learner, I learnt by doing it myself. I smirked at the idea.

"Friends?" she said in a filmy style as we shook hands.

'Friends' we said in unison and chuckled. Our happy laughter echoed in the setting. The water roared again, warning us not to disturb the otherwise silent ambience. In this pure and humble

atmosphere, we became friends fortuitously; first step is what I call it. The fifteen minute walk ended fleetingly.

We both went back sharing smiles as Sunaina called up Anamika for lunch, nobody called me? Oops! I don't have a phone, I immediately realized.

After lunch we all changed and left for Van Vihar for river rafting. We did not share much after that walk, just some acute smiles and short-lived eye contacts. I looked at her in after every five seconds or so. And the point to be noted is that whenever I looked at her, coincidently she too was looking at me. I was confident yet nervous. She was giving looks man!

Soon we left for hotel after having our dinner at the Mall Road *dhaba*. In between we shared things like, would like to have this? Can you pass me that stuff? Can you please move a bit aside? Excuse me? I was not growing beyond this. My kinesthetic learning started fading away.

"Hey what's the scene for tonight man?" Karan asked as Aniket too joined us. Rahul and Oshit were busy in their personal issues. Shanaya, Sunaina and Anamika were busy gossiping.

"What scene?" I asked.

"Boozing?" Aniket winked.

"What? You know I don't drink", I protested.

"C'mon man you're a grown up now, nobody is here to bother. No parents, nothing. So just gulp down some shots tiger", he tried to provoke me using that last word.

"Okay, but not today, today is Tuesday and I can't start with this thing on Tuesday", I pretended to agree but somehow I put that thing off to the next day.

They both laughed. Bloody atheists!

"Okay then done for tomorrow", Aniket said and we walked towards the hotel. Our hotel was not very far from the Mall Road. So, it hardly took fifteen minutes to walk down. Aniket and Sunaina walked hand in hand ahead of us while Shanaya and Anamika shared smiles. Me and Karan yelled rubbish throughout and messed around with foreign tourists.

We reached our rooms and transformed ourselves in pajamas. It was 11:30pm, our hotel room phone rang. The phones were all connected, you just need to know the room number and you can talk endlessly at no extra cost.

"Hello", Aniket said as I lied down on bed. "Anamika, okay!" Aniket said as I jumped up.

"She wants to talk to you", Aniket said and put the receiver down. "What's going on boss, what's the scene haan?" Karan inquired as Aniket nudged me in the rib winking and laughing. I showed them the

finger they well deserved to see and grabbed the phone signaling the duo to stay away while I talk.

"Hello", I cleared my throat.

"Hello! Ahem! Ahem!" Karan imitated and kicked my butt.

"Hello", Anamika said meekly.

"Yes, what happened", I asked.

"No nothing like that, just wanted to say goodnight", she said in the sweetest possible voice.

I laughed slightly, "What? That's it?" I asked.

"What more are you expecting huh?" she said as she laughed and hung the phone down without even waiting for my reply. I could also hear Shanaya and Sunaina's chuckles providing a background sound effect. I took a minute to overcome the incident and then a thought surpassed my little brain- have I just been prank called? Maybe, no doubt these girls were wicked witches in disguise, except Anamika of course!

I wondered what was that? I was confused, the phone rang again. I picked it up.

"I love you", a feminine voice said, before I could recognize who was that I got paralyzed.

"What?" I screamed as my heartbeats increased at an exponential rate.

"Aniket?" she asked.

"Sunaina?" I said. Phew!

"Aarav?" she said.

I laughed.

"Oh sorry! I thought it was Aniket. I'm so really sorry, don't tell anyone. Can you just… " Sunaina pleaded in an embarrassed tone.

"Yeah sure, don't worry", I said controlling my laugh.

"Love calls for you *jaanu*", I said kicking his bums. Karan and I shared a laugh. And the very next moment I was preoccupied with my own thoughts.

The thought, illusion rather, that it was Anamika, numbed my heart. I was dead for a moment. The momentary illusion was enough of a blow to my little innocent heart.

Later Aniket and Sunaina talked for the whole night I guess. If you're given free means of communication, then who the hell cares about hours. Me and Karan stuck pillows on our ears to avoid those silly *Aww my baby, mera Bachha, my shonu, my jaanu*.

I don't know when I fell asleep thinking of Anamika. The Second day started with an unusual door bell and as usual no one was interested in opening the door, lazy asses!

"Get up boys, else we're leaving without you guys for Rohtang Pass", a hoarse male voice declared knocking the door twice so

vigorously that after the second knock, we froze for a minute thinking that we were held hostage by a terrorist gang. We all stood up like army cadets. I had never ever imagined that we would fight for the bathroom to take bath before the others, but we *did* pull out each other to get in first. We were ready! Glasses, watches, new shoes and expensive deodorants, everything was upto the mark as we left the room.

The day passed in Rohtang valley clicking photographs, munching the lunch, site seeing, but Anamkia was not even near me. No eye contacts, no smiles, nothing. I had no conversation with Anamika. A Bad day for me!

"What about beer today?" Aniket said in state of exhilaration.

"What?" I and Oshit said in chorus.

"You are all are grownups assholes, now or never!" he said to influence using that 'now or never' thing.

"But I haven't tried anything like this before, what if I lose consciousness?" I asked in an innocent tone, I was innocent though.

"*Saale mai kya yaha bewda baitha hu?* We all are first timers man! Let's celebrate this moment of lifetime, this will *not* come again". Aniket manipulated things as we all looked at each other with our eyebrows raised and swallowing some spit. We all nodded in agreement, the man in us was awake without knowing the later upshots.

I, Oshit and Rahul decided to stay back at the hotel while Karan and Aniket decided to bring up the boozing stuff safely. Three of us sat on the entrance stairs waiting for them. Those not-yet-drunk-asses were getting hell out of us. Weird thoughts started to hover my mind. What if a teacher caught us drinking? What if we create a scene after boozing? What if I jump over Anamika in excitement? What if I propose her after drinking, something that I can't do while I am in my senses. Lack of guts in my butts! Loser I was, loser I am. I saw Anamika laughing with some fire balls of the bonfire soaring in the air, she was looking a stunner. A red, white and black striped deep neck top and denim shorts. Her thick black framed glasses were missing. Her brown eyeballs were glowing like pearls. Amazing it was, it was more.

Sunaina asked me about Aniket's whereabouts. I replied that I had no idea. Our heartbeats were increasing as people started asking about the missing duo.

"What should we do Aarav? I'm having an intuition that we'd be caught and they'll send us back to Delhi tonight itself after informing our parents about this!" The latter half of the sentence brought my heart to a long pause.

I stood up and commanded, "let's go and stop them".

We headed towards the Mall Road from the back side of the hotel. We ran like jacks and met both of them on the Mall Road end.

"Look, what I've got", Aniket said with a wicked smile.

"We aren't doing this Aniket" I said gathering some strength to snatch the bag full of beer cans and a whisky bottle.

"Are you nuts?" Aniket yelled throwing is hands off.

"What if a teacher caught us drinking? What if we create a scene after boozing? What if I jump over…", I stopped as I was about to utter my thoughts out.

"Jump over?" Karan said.

I bit my tongue and tried to control the situation.

"We are not doing this, that's it", I said as Aniket and Karan snatched the bag from my hand. They took out the fosters and gulped down the whole can in one go.

"What the hell?" finally Rahul broke his silence, Oshit still noiseless and in panic.

"Ahhh, this is life!" Aniket said as we made a face. Karan opened the whisky bottle as Aniket's phone rang.

"Yea baby, will be back in five minutes, yea sure", he said. It must be Sunaina for sure.

"Who?" Oshit said giving a terrified look.

"Anamika", Aniket whispered, fosters was doing its job on him.

"What did she say?" I asked.

"She said she loves you asshole", he smeared.

"Just shut this fuck up Aniket, you're drunk! Get back to the hotel", I declared.

"Do you think I'm kidding? Why don't you go and ask her? And if you have no guts, whisky will surely help", he said as everyone laughed at me.

"C'mmon Aarav, now or never!" exclaimed Karan as I gave a microsecond thought and snatched the bottle from his hand. I opened the seal in scurry. I smelled it, it was just like another cough syrup for me, I was still a kid.

"Go on, she'll be off to bed and your effort will be in vain", Aniket provoked me again. As I took a sip, I felt like vomiting it out but Karan pushed my head back and helped me to swallow alcohol for the first time in my life. It was good though. I gulped some pegs straight away. Boundless heat started being emitted out of my body and a few cool waves rushed all over. In the next five minutes the phenomena of revolution of earth seemed quite realistic to me.

We reached the hotel somehow, bonfire party was yet not over. Me, Aniket and Karan were almost out of our senses. Aniket yelled rubbish while Karan kept on laughing without any reasons and I was looking for Anamika.

“C’mmon boy”, Aniket said as he patted my shoulder. I did most of the things because he provoked me, this is what you call a real peer pressure.

We decided to go and talk down stairs near the river’s end. I could barely move but I don’t know how I stepped down 23 stairs and 500 meters of a straight walk easily.

“Hi sweetheart”, I said and smiled as I finally got Anamika by my side.

She gave me a what-did-you-just-say look.

I stepped forward towards her, and then I just know that I saw the ground next.

“Where are you Anamika, please come back, I want to say something”

“Hey Aarav, are you alright? Get up, I am here only”, she expressed deep concern. How caring she was!

“Hey Anamika, I am so glad to see you again and yeah, Nothing like that, I am fine”, I said and chuckled.

“Aarav, are you drunk?” she asked in a raised tone, looking away.

“Shh! All this is for you”. I looked straight into her shining brown eyes now. Everything went silent.

“What is happening here? Will someone bother to explain me?” she panicked.

I managed to stand up straight on my own. I bent forward to take her hand into mine and sat on my knees. Karan hooted and laughed. His voice echoed and disturbed me. I took out the first thing that came into my hand from my pocket and threw it at Karan. It hit Rahul I guess but my aim was achieved. Silence spread all over.

I got back to Anamika. Her soft hands were cold, yet sweaty. She was shivering or perhaps I was swinging a bit too much. I began.

“I still remember the day I first saw you. The very moment I saw you, you made my heart insane. I never had guts to talk to you, never had the confidence to say ‘hi’. I don’t know what you do to me. I can’t explain how you make me feel.”

I crawled towards her, and held her hand between both my hands and gently rubbed it. She seemed to have frozen, no response, good for me.

I breathed and continued.

“Anamika, you are the best thing that has ever happened to me. I love you ….”

I waited for her to respond. She didn’t even blink once. I felt more dizzy with every passing moment.

I waited for her to say something. But darkness replaced her beautiful face. I just felt I was floating in the air.

I don’t know where I slept that night, and who dragged me to

where I found myself in the morning. I'm not even sure if Anamika had slapped me or given a rude refusal or said goodbye to my friendship as well.

I opened my eyes slowly, my mouth smelling awful. Karan was sleeping with his one heavy leg on my stomach and the second leg between my legs. Too awkward a position it was. I got up, pushing Karan away. I took two baby steps and stumbled over Aniket and fell down on him. We almost escaped a hard smooch! He woke up, pushed me away, covered his chest with his both hands and shouted, "Don't rape me!"

His breath nearly made me faint.

But I was concerned about last night, about Anamika.

"Shut the fuck up and tell me what happened?" I nearly jumped over Aniket.

"What what happened? I don't know, I have not done anything! God knows I am loyal to Sunaina", he nearly cried.

"Oh just shut up! What did I do last night?" I looked at him with hopeful eyes.

"I think…well, I don't know. I just know Rahul brought me here".

Aniket's uncertain reply made my heart sink. I glumly went to the washroom and got ready for the day. All good ideas strike you when you are on the commode, I should call up Sunaina and ask. I hurriedly took a bath and came out.

I grabbed the phone and dialed 76, and waited till the bell rang.

"Hello", Anamika's sweet voice greeted me.

I trembled. In a shivering voice I replied to her, "Hello, Anamika?"

There was a long silence hovering between us until I heard a click! She hung up.

What should I do now? I just had infinite number of questions boggling my mind, but not a single answer. I sat down like *Devdas*, not drunk this time.

"We are leaving the hotel in like five minutes", Rahul peeped inside the room and informed.

I carelessly packed my bag and gave a dirty look to who-so-ever tried to talk to me.

I stepped down the stairs of the hotel and approached the bus. I was one of the students who had been pretty late, late enough to invite ugly stares from even the asshole kid. I got into the bus, everyone seemed depressed. The trip was over. I could not find Anamika in the bus. As I moved forward to grab a seat with Karan, sitting alone this time, I saw Anamika looking outside the window of the last seat. She didn't even look at me. So, I had messed it up a big deal. I sighed and sat with Karan who was pretty busy with his i-pod,

too tired to talk to me, to anyone.

The journey back to Delhi was a monotonous one until we stopped at Manikaran Gurudwara. A beautiful place, hot water spring, the purity and the spiritual essence of the place made me feel a bit tranquil. Yet, I was too scared to approach Anamika for clarifying anything. Everyone was pretty anxious to find food in the *langar pandaal*. I wasn't hungry. I was in love, I was scared, and I had messed it up.

I walked to the bridge that passed over the hot water spring. It was a wooden bridge, a 'non engineered' structure. The view from the bridge was mesmerizing. The flow of the water did not reflect the beauty of the surroundings. Rather, the silvery flake and wild flow drew the attention of passersby. It was unusually beautiful. The noise of the rapid flow of water echoed in the setting, silencing the screams of my heart.

"Aarav!" Anamika's saccharine voice addressed me, seeking my immediate attention. I had no courage to look into her eyes, but I had no self control as well. I turned and raised my eyes to meet her gaze, her head was covered with a black scarf.

"Can we talk?" she asked, shrugging her shoulders like an innocent three year old.

I just aped her shrugging gesture and nodded. She sat beside me with a leaf bowl full of *halwa*.

"You seem to have lost appetite, huh?" she began. Girls know how to begin conversations, talking about irrelevant things and then moving to specific topics of extreme significance.

"Umm…nothing like that, just not hungry".

"You're such a copy cat", She accused me.

"Anamika, I am just so sorry about whatever…". A gentle press on my hand terminated my words.

"Aarav, I just want to say that I respect your feelings a lot but… umm… Well, I don't know why, I like to spend time with you. I love to talk to you. I feel so comfortable with you. I can trust you with my life. You are perhaps the friend I can be with, always". She spoke every word clearly and slowly. She sighed and swallowed.

So, she likes me. I felt a little smile conquering my face.

"But, this might not be possible. Destiny is not in my favor Aarav. Having feelings for you is impulsive, I can't help it somehow… but it's not me that I am concerned about", She paused and looked straight into my eyes, searchingly.

"You may regret having those feelings for me". She winced and concluded her conversation with an unexplained statement. She got up and left before I could make sense of her words.

She had left me with a creased forehead.

Love in Delhi!

We boarded the bus to depart for the next destination-Delhi. Anamika had now decided to be my seat partner again. She had left me in a I-don't-know-what-to-say-now state. I could not start any conversation, I couldn't respond. I just claimed my seat beside her with a half-smile and raised eyebrows. My mind was blank, body was numb. I looked somewhere in the air. There was an uncomfortable silence hovering between us, atleast on my side. I swallowed and looked at her. She turned towards me. It was an awkward eye contact, so I turned back. She giggled. Oshit replaced the silence with some wonderful tracks.

Everyone was, by now, seated comfortably in their seats. I adjusted myself in my seat and placed my hands on my thighs in front of me. An electric shock took away my senses. Out of nowhere, Anamika's hand claimed my hand. She pulled it to place our hands between us. She was bold enough to take the initiative. I could have only thought all my life to ask to hold her hand. She slipped comfortably in her seat and closed her eyes.

I wondered how it would be like if I took her hand between both my hands. Would she protest? Would she leave my hand? I chose to try this time. I gently placed my other hand on top of her supple hand already in my grasp. She hesitated for a fraction of second, pulled back but became stable. I sighed. I pressed her hand gently as she looked at me and her face flushed with pink color. She gave the most charming smile that could be witnessed. She moved towards me and rested her head lightly on my shoulder.

I could not wish for anything more, I didn't want to. In response to that, I just bent in her course to ensure her ease.

We remained in that pose for a long time. My shoulder felt heavier now. She had slept.

Her hand was still safe in my hands. Thankfully no one tried to take a sneak peek into our seat, there were better things in the world

to do than to poke into the seats of others.

I rested my head lightly on her head and closed my eyes.

I woke up when suddenly the bus driver applied brakes abruptly. I and Anamika were shook out of our seats. I nearly banged my head against the front seat but a soft hand saved my forehead. Anamika smiled as I looked at her gratefully.

“So you plan not to talk till we reach Delhi?”, Anamika asked as she looked at me with a puerile look on her face.

“Umm, no nothing like that…” I realized I had now unintentionally inherited her most-used-phrase, so I bit my tongue. She chuckled. I returned a smile. “I just don’t know what to talk about after what you said to me at Manikaran”, I made a face.

She had a weird expression on her face momentarily and she switched back to her smile.

“So, who’s idea was it?” she suddenly asked.

“What? What are you talking about?” I asked as I scratched my head, not being able to relate with her question.

“Boozing! Who suggested it?” she asked as she winked at me.

I gave her a I-am-sorry-for -that look and looked in Aniket’s direction.

“I knew it! It couldn’t have been your idea”, she said and beamed.

We shared a few smiles and then talked about random things. Knowing her likes and dislikes was my prime motto of the conversation. In no time, I started loving people like Sourav Ganguly. Mamta Banerjee was my favorite politician. Fish was my favorite cuisine now. I wanted to know everything about her. I wanted her to share her every secret with me, and I would share mine. I wanted this girl to be with me always. I was in love with her, once and for all.

The journey back to Delhi seemed easier when Anamika and I started talking. Finally we had reached. Though I had happiness of returning back to my own city, but undoubtedly, I was anxious about the approaching separation from Anamika.

Delhi was hot as always. I had missed the climate, the pollution, the noise, the life the city has, its busy roads, skyscrapers, and all that shit. The bus stopped and I had already started missing Anamika.

She disappeared into the crowd to get her belongings. I followed her, wishing if I could take her with me.

I held my bag as the *driver bhaiya* nearly threw my bag at me. His way of handling my bag was completely in contrast with the manner in which he handled the bags of girls!

Suddenly, Anamika appeared out of nowhere. “Umm… I just wanted to…well… thank you for making my trip so amazing”, she said and smiled at me with glittery eyes.

I could do nothing but smile back.

"School is still closed for summer break, I was wondering how would we contact each other?" she grimaced.

"Are you on facebook?" I asked.

"No, I'm not interested in all this sort of networking sites. To be honest I don't have a PC at home", she smiled. I loved her genuineness unlike people like me who will never tell her that they don't have a cell phone.

"Okay, I'll call you then, give me your number?" I uttered as if I owned a mobile company! The bitter truth was to be hidden from her. I reconsidered my idea of sharing all my secrets with her.

"Oh yeah", she spoke as she recited her number at a pace as if she was telling it to confirm the digits.

"Oh! I have learnt it up!" I said and grimaced.

"Oopsy! You give me yours naa, I'll call you up!" she said and I looked for an excuse.

"Actually, my phone, these days, is with mum. You know she is kind of concerned about my studies and all that. Wait, I'll note yours down and will give you a buzz", I looked for a pen, but I noticed her already scribbling something on a paper.

"Here it is", she said and smiled.

I took the paper from her as she picked up her ringing phone.

"*Aami aschi maa, Ohh tumi dariye acho darao*", She said as she looked at me, blinked her lovely eyes and smiled, as I actually tried to understand what did she really say to her mother. She held her hand out to me to say goodbye. I took her hand comfortably in both my hands, dropping my luggage on the floor. She looked down and turned, talking on the phone.

"*Haan maa, aami phone raakhi*."

She left me alone in the crowd of hundreds. I saw her until she reached the gate and turned back to look at me, perhaps she even winked and smiled. My gaze followed her until she disappeared.

I saw a familiar male figure waving his hand, to me perhaps. I had known this person for long. Umm…Oh! That's my dad!

I walked towards him dragging my luggage along. He hugged me as if I had just returned alive from the warfront.

I closed my eyes in the car to gather all the beautiful moments I had lived in the past few days of my life. I stretched my body and heard a mild crushing sound in my pocket.

Oh! That's the most essential chit that I own! I patted my pocket and smiled to myself.

We reached home. I wondered if there was a 'welcome home' party for me. Well, my thoughts sometimes run hyperbolic. Thankfully, nothing of that sort was there. I suddenly felt too tired

and went straight to my room and slipped into my bed.

I can sleep a lot! That's a talent if you ask me, not many people have it. I opened my eyes the next afternoon! And yes I dreamt of her all night. ☺

I marched out of my room like a cool dude. I was now a tiger. I had had my first booze, I had proposed a girl in catalepsy, and I now had a semi-girlfriend who had given me her number. I had a sudden urge to listen to her voice. PHONE! All my tiger attitude was washed over under the shame of not having a phone.

I noticed my mom's phone on the dining table. Mom's phone has always been a kind of public phone, available to everyone, anytime. Well, the ground was clear. No one was around. I had the number, and I had the craving to talk, I was in love and now I had the phone.

I searched for the chit Anamika had given to me. In beautiful digits, as they seemed to me, she had given me the means of listening to her voice anytime, I mean, whenever I had the phone.

I was sweating as I picked up the phone. Rolling my eyes everywhere, I dialed the number, an easy to learn number, or maybe I learnt it because I wanted to remember it for a lifetime. I saved her number under a ghost name 'fish'. I stuck the phone onto my ear.

A baby laughed. A cheerful laugh it was. All I heard was baby laughter.

Has she played a prank? Is it a number that no one picks and on which only a baby laughs? God damn! She must be laughing at me for being so stupid.

"Hello!"

"Huh? Hello, who's this?" I did something really stupid as I immediately recognized Anamika's sugary voice. So, that was not a prank, it was just her caller tune. But she pays ₹30 per month for THAT crap!

"Aarav? Is that you? There? Can you listen to me?"

I regained my senses and answered, "Yes, Aarav this side, how are you?"

"Heaven knows how much I was waiting for you to contact me", She said in a very raring-to-go tone.

"I am so sorry, actually I was…umm… sleeping", I said, being conscious about her reaction to sleeping till this late.

"Oh! Anyways… So, this is your personal number right? I'll save it right away". A lady called her from background.

"Got to go, ma calling, Take care", And snap!

My personal number?

The baby laughter echoed in my ears again. Well, let it be then, I decided. Mom is mine, the phone is hers, so combining both

equations, the phone is mine. Thinking that way made me feel good.

I decided I'll be around the phone all the time. But of course it was not possible for me to do that. I got goose-bumps. So now, mom's number is my number. A text beeped.

Anamika's text beeped.

Lucky 2 hav u in my lyf<3 ☺'

Aww! I immediately pressed the reply button and typed.

Trust me, I am luckier than you' and I pressed the send button as I heard mum's footsteps.

Oh holy crap! I am screwed! Another text beeped.

"Whose message is it? Are you texting someone?" Mom gave a suspicious look. I quickly opened the message and looked. It read:

'Shoo shweeett of u…'

I deleted it and the sent items!

"N…N…Nothing ma, just sauna slim belt advertisement, for Vaibhavi I guess", I said and laughed alone at my own lame joke.

Mum went to the kitchen.

"So, how was the trip? It was very rude of you to come and sleep like that last night. We had been missing you so much and your behavior clearly outlined how much you value us". And she continued complaining.

I was worried about the texts. Should I tell Anamika that this is not my number? NO! Not at all! I should put up a lock code on this phone. But how would I justify a secret lock code on mum's phone? I first put the phone on silent mode. There must be a solution, and I have to figure it out.

"Are you listening?" Mom's raised voice shook me.

"Oh yeah mum! Sorry for last night. The trip was really nice. Manali is a beautiful place".

"I know, your dad and I went for honeymoon there only. We began our lives there". She said as she giggled and perhaps blushed.

"And so did I", I instinctively uttered.

"What?"

"Oh nothing mom, I was just saying that it was a wonderful experience of my life."

I immediately screened Anamika's number. All I needed was a message pack in mom's phone without telling it to her.

And mom's phone was with me almost all time. I woke up to read her good morning message and slept after her good night message. It became our daily routine.

We had a little chatting, as having the phone with me all the time was problematic. I usually had to make an excuse of using the calculator or alarm clock feature to keep the phone with me.

Holidays were about to get over. I had no idea of the whereabouts of my books, notes, or anything. I just knew about the calculator and the alarm clock.

"*So wots ur plan tomoro?*" Anamika enquired.

"*um..nthn as such,,wat abt u?*"

"*I was wondrin if I cud meet u tomoro,,if possi, even a few mins wud work*"

"*yeah! Y not! Where? Wen?*"

"*actually it's my bday 2mrw ☺*"

"*oHH!! I shud have known dat! M so sorry! V'l meet 4 sure!*"

"*okay den, delhi haat tom sharp at 12:00, gunnyt, take care☺*"

I wondered when our chats will end with a *Love you* from her side. I once thought of asking, but then eventually dropped the idea.

So, it's her birthday tomorrow.

I Have to get out of the house tomorrow at any cost.

I have to make her day special.

Let me plan a surprise for her.

I smiled at the thought and slept, dreaming of her.

First Date and an Empty wallet!

1 1:00 pm.

I have to be the first one to wish her. The thought made me anxious. The phone! How do I get it? Claiming all rights over the phone is just not possible after 10. I need to plan a late night study. But in vacations, what is the need for it? Aargh!

Okay! Calm down boy! You have a test tomorrow at the insti. Simple. Job done! Where is my calculator?

11:45 AM.

I think I must call her now. I don't want anyone else to wish her before I do.

I ensured that my room is immune to any sudden raids by anyone, and dialled the golden digits. Baby laughter.

"Hello!" she said in a drowsy voice.

"Ahem! Sleeping?" I asked, feeling guilty after hearing her tone of response.

She chuckled. "Actually, I am feeling exceptionally sleepy today. You called so early, stealing others' chance of wishing me first, eh?"

"Yes, I wanted to be the first one", I could visualize her beautiful smile as a long silence hovered between us.

"Oh no, Shanaya's call is on wait. But let it be. She shall wait"

Now *that* brought a smile on my face.

"Three minutes to go!" I tried a lot to sound excited.

"Yeah yeah!"

"You are not very excited about your birthday, are you?" "Well, not much. All friends are somehow busy with themselves, no birthday celebrations for me. This is one big disadvantage of having your birthday in vacations. This is going to be one such day", She sighed.

"Maybe not, well Happy birthday to you..", I started singing happy birthday jingle for her. And a sudden cacophony echoed in the setting. Obviously I am describing it in a better way.

"Thanks a lot dear. Oh, I need to go, I am just so sorry. Good

night. Bye"

And bang! She hung up. Why did she always disconnect in such an emergency? Anyways, I was the first one to wish her.

The screen lit up, screened message from 'fish'.

"*Wana meet u 2mrw..EVNIN..dnt rply nw..gunyt☺*"

My late night study schedule ended abruptly and I claimed my bed.

"What are you doing? Where are you going? Don't you have your insti today?" Vaibhavi threw a dozen of questions as I was getting ready for our first ever encounter after the school trip. Hardly a week was left for reopening of the last year of our school life. This took me a year back when I saw Anamika for the first time. I wondered how drastically things change in one's life.

"I need to go, today is An…iket's birthday", I said as I was ironing my black shirt. "And I'm taking mom's phone, so call me once or twice in every minute as you do", I added. "Mom's phone? No insti? You were studying for some test I guess. I think I should better talk to dad about all this, you don't look serious about your IIT preparations", She yelled throwing her hands. I ignored her completely and customized the phone settings, a loud ringtone and a flashy wallpaper to flaunt.

Me-Aarav Sharma, the son of an engineer, just existing to rote memorize formulas-I was literally away from my dad's big money and farther away from flaunting my own phone. I sighed as I smeared some gel and 30ml deodorant to smell sensuous. I puffed that almost 20 times all over my body, all over! I was getting ready as if it was my engagement evening. My sister kept her eyes widened and her mouth open, trying to understand what I was trying to do. She was witnessing the other side of me now.

I left in eagerness. It was a mid-July afternoon-a bit hot and humid, but still cloudy. I reached the metro station faster than usual, taking long steps and wiping the sweat off. I decided to leave for Dilli Haat. I checked my mobile every next second, smelled my underarms to recheck if I smelled good or not, rubbed my shoes against my denim every next minute, and looked continuously on the doors of metro, which had reflective glasses. I informed her that I had left for Dilli Haat. She didn't reply. I reached Netaji Subhash place metro station in around forty minutes of anxious metro travel, repeatedly calling her, but all in vain. She did not respond. I turned down and checked my phone again as I took exit from the metro station. It had a message

from Anamika: “call urgent!”

A usual gesture of girls, they’ll never call you. Either they will message you or give you a miss call at maximum even when it is urgent, an unexplained secret.

I called her.

“I’m just so so so so sorrryyyyyyyyyyyy”, she said as my tiredness went off with her sweet stretched words. “I was busy with bhaiya, he’s getting married this November, so was just busy shopping”, she added.

“Shopping? But we were supposed to meet today and I have reached already, this is not done!” I said standing under a metro pillar trying to remain cool.

“Oh! No! It just slipped off my mind in excitement. I’m really sorry. Okay just wait for me, I’m at Cannought Palace. Will catch you in approx…umm… fifty nine minutes”, she said adding a laugh.

WHAT! You expect me to stand here for god damn one hour! I said this to myself, gained some self control and finally uttered in a calm voice, “Okay I’m waiting for you, come soon”,

“Oh! You’re sooooo sweet Aarav”, she giggled and clicked. The annoyance died and the excitement of meeting her occupied my senses once again.

The temperature was 40 degrees, humidity was 68% and I had to wait for her one whole hour, well fifty nine minutes.

I sat on a bench under a tree at Dilli Haat’s entrance with a hanky and two coke pet bottles in my hand which I got for free in a coca cola promotion campaign. I was drinking, thinking and wiping sweat and this was supposed to be continued for next one hour, fifty nine minutes I mean.

The deodorant’s effect was already discharged and the awful sweat smell was on, charging. I repented why I applied hair gel, it was only absorbing dust particles into my hair. My hanky had gone brown, loops of sweat had formed around my underarms, everything was ruined!

Finally my phone rang bringing up some gusto back in me, ‘fish’ calling”, it flashed. Anamika it was.

“Hey, where have you reached?” I inquired in a low voice.

“I’m almost there, just five minutes, wait for me!” she said as she clicked before the conversation could reach the timeline of one minute. I wonder why did she call even.

I was looking at a poor boy, begging for a rupee to every next person. Meanwhile I saw Anamika stepping up on the entrance stairs. She could be easily recognized in the big ugly crowd. A long brown top and a cream colored shorts, perfectly complimenting each other, two big bangles, wrist watch and a tiny handbag, a black coloured

anklet in her right leg glorifying her grey stilettos.

“Hey, I’m really very sorry. Did I come so late?” she said as I stood up.

“No you came on time, I just came early to see if this place is safe for the birthday princess”, I said in annoyance trying to gain some attention.

“Awwwww, I’m so so so sorryyyyyy. Please please please forgive me”. I seriously think that stretching words sweetly is the girls’ most powerful weapon against us.

“Oh! It’s okay Anamika. Let’s not spoil the day”, I said with a smile as I handed over a card to her.

“Happy birthday dear!” I winked at her.

“Thank you so much Aarav. Ok now, what’s the plan?” she smiled.

“Well, we are going in. Wait I’m going to bring the tickets”, I said as I left. I went to the ticket counter.

“Two tickets for adults.”

“40 rupees”, the uncle said in heavy voice.

I took out my wallet and my heart beat increased. I saw nothing but a metro smart card in my wallet. What the hell! No money in my wallet! On my first date ever! On her birthday! Though, it was her treat technically, but still what would she think of me now? I wasted my time like this on the counter. I even imagined myself as the poor boy asking for one rupee from the crowd. In hurry of reaching here early and jerking out my mind with shit yelled by Vaibhavi, I forgot to bring money. An empty wallet, an uneasy semi-girlfriend, the hot and humid weather, everything was leading me to a doomed failure!

The counter uncle spoke and ordered me to get out of the way.

It’s not that I’m not smart enough to tackle problems, it’s just that I stay with problems longer.

“Tickets?” she said as she moved her right hand towards me to take one.

“mmm actually Ana…”, I stopped.

“What?”

“Actually, mom just called me and she wants me to come urgently. So, I think we should leave!” I said in one breath, releasing it on her face.

“What? Are you sick? You know I forced my brother to bring an end to his engagement shopping and ran outta there like a fox! For meeting you Aarav! Not for listening what you said just now!” She too yelled in one breath stressing on ‘engagement shopping’.

“But how can I ..”, I interrupted.

“You don’t know, how hard it is to .. “, she stopped and looked away.

“Hard to ?” I asked stepping to the side where she was looking.

She smiled and replied, “You know, it is not easy to stay away from you. I mean I want to be with you but .”, she stopped again and looked away.

“But?” I went close to her.

“I like to be with you Aarav! Please don’t go so early”, she said making a cute face and rolling the ‘but’ question the other way.

“What are you thinking now?” she asked waving her hand in front of my face to distract me out of my deep thoughts.

“mmmm .. nothing just .. I “, I thought for a second what to say next as I blurted out the truth in front of her.

“Are you sick? Let me clear things with you Mr. Aarav. I would be happy to take a walk with you rather than sitting in a posh café. I would be happy to listen some beautiful words from you than pinning my ears to songs played in a disc, so please..”

Now I interrupted, “I’m really sorry Anamika. I was a bit disorganised at that very moment. Umm… So shall we go for a walk now with an empty wallet?” I said and smiled at her. “Perhaps you forgot it’s my birthday, so the treat is on me”, She said and winked at me. I gave an ashamed smile. We both began from the NSP metro station and we decided to walk till Rohini west station. But before that I saw the back gate of Dilli Haat, where I saw an uncle with long curved moustache in a blue security guard uniform. I tried to be a hero and went straight to him.

“Uncle, is this a way to go in?”

“No boy, get a ticket and try from the other gate. This area is for VIPs. Now go away!” He seemed big-headed.

“Okay”, I said and stepped back making an innocent face.

I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder suddenly. I was scared for a moment. I turned.

“Boy I heard you people talking, want to go in? ehh?”

I looked at Anamika, she was standing with an open mouth. I gained senses and nodded.

“But beware of all these things at this age. Be in limits boy!” He accused us as if we were making love on the busy roads of Pitampura. He left me with an embarrassed look on my face.

No money but entry via VIP gate! Hail security uncle! He transformed into a good man from being a smug in a few seconds! She smiled, that’s what all I wanted. Although, she had money but the real fun lies in such situations like entering from a VIP gate for free.

We both went in. I felt I did something good to her finally. She smiled after all. The Sri Lankan carnival was on. The most exciting thing was the ticket included free game trials. We played games like throw the ring, shoot the balloon, jackpot and many more but won

nothing in the end except a few laughs which were more precious than any jackpot for us. We shared moments of lifetime, looked at menu cards just to grab a seat for a few minutes of rest. We walked, we ran, we jumped and then we danced on the Sri Lankan beats too. We were going senseless every next second. Finally we ate!

"It was awesome! I had the best time of my life with you Aarav!" she smiled as I died again.

"I don't have words to explain the time I have spent with you shona!" I said. Now from where did the last word come actually?

"Shona?" she exclaimed.

"No actually, I didn't mean that", I said staying aback.

"No! It was so sweet of you! Do you know what does 'shona' mean in Bengali? It means sweetheart", she winked.

I felt impressed with myself that very moment.

"So can I call you out by this name from now on.. Shona?" I asked as we both laughed, enclosed in shyness. We decided to leave as it was getting late for both of us.

I wondered why mom or Vaibhavi never called. Was everything okay with them?

It would take thirty to forty minutes to reach there if you walk normally but we started with an intention of reaching in not less than a hour. Baby steps, unsurpassed smiles and a cloudy weather to be praised.

"You like rains?" she began her conversation abruptly.

"Umm…not much"

"Oh! That means you don't like it".

"No, nothing like that…I have only wanted to get drenched with someone special", Whoa! I was learning to talk to a girl. She smiled and perhaps I saw her turning pink.

"Oh okay, and how many someone specials have you been with till now?" she giggled.

I stopped and stepped right in front of her. There was absolute silence for a few seconds. Our eyes shared an unbreakable bond. I gathered all my love for her and said, "You are the one, the special one, valued and important".

She blinked and looked away. I had no idea why she did that.

"What happened?" I asked impatiently.

"Well, you became pretty serious eh?" and she stuck out her tongue and laughed. Seeing her innocent smile, I couldn't suppress my smile and laughed with her.

We walked till Pitampura non-stop. Our little fingers heartened each other after every few seconds and the sensation that rolled after that in my whole body is just totally unexplainable! Showers gained pace and volume.

I looked at her. She replied with a smile. She clutched my hand and added a grin.

I never felt like this before, it made me so jumpy that I clutched her hand more tightly and we jumped on the water sags madly. We walked again. Our little fingers clutching each other tightly now and in a few seconds, fingers crisscrossing each other, walking hand in hand for the first time, badly drenched.

My insides were not so visible due to my black shirt but her insides were visible noticeably. She was aware of it as she covered herself with her hands to some extent. I tried to look away as far as possible, but the people around were continuously looking at her. Her top was completely glued to her skin and she felt uneasy. Men passing by gave her deplorable looks and stared continuously.

My veins were full of blood.

“Come!” I said as I grabbed her wrist and took her under a tree.

We looked into each other’s eyes, she straightened down her arms but I still looked into her eyes. She stepped forward. I claimed her into my arms. It was a rare heat transfer. I finally understood the laws of thermodynamics.

People ran around and stared at us. I brushed my hand on her back. We both were shivering, but the warmth we felt was off every wall. The hug went tight with time. She grappled my shirt from back and groomed her face on my shoulder. My both hands went automatically on her waist. This was something rare for me. She looked at me as we both moved our faces a bit more closely and the clutch went tenser. My muscles contracted, I was numb. I felt like no one is around. Meanwhile I felt something in my jeans that distracted me. No it is not what you’re thinking!

It was my phone, my phone which was on loud mode but yet vibrated at the lowest pace. We were disconnected as I took out the phone in hurry, the screen flashed nothing but still I picked it. An ominous sound was what I could hear. Anamika took her hands off me and looked away, and I looked around.

People standing fifty meters away glanced at us like dogs. I tried to recover from the situation as I realized that in the excitement I had forgotten that I was carrying my mom’s phone. I was badly wet from my hair to my socks, so was the phone. It was wet, dead and inoperative. R.I.P. mom’s phone!

I was fucked!

Life after love!

We left from there bidding good bye. I gave her a clue that MY phone had committed suicide and communication via phone would be difficult now, by difficult I meant impossible.

With an ashamed and afraid look on my face, I entered my house. Home scary home! “Oh Aarav! You are drenched wet! Go and change before you fall ill”, My mother exclaimed. Her tone was compassionate and caring. It would surely change for the worse if she would come to know about her dear little phone.

I had no courage to tell her about it, so I quietly placed the corpse on the table and waited. Silence of the graveyard or still before the storm would better describe the setting. To summarize, I would just say I got slapped and the phone was now a forgotten dream.

Schools reopened in a few days. Today I was at ease. School would at least give me a chance to talk to her properly. Lost in anticipation, I left for school. I entered the school, searching her everywhere. Friends hugging and celebrating reunion just like the last year. Only, I was a part of it this time. I received a few warm hugs and hi’s.

A light tickle in the waist stirred me. Her chuckle brought my heart to a pause.

“How have you been Mr.?” She asked me, looking at me with smiling brown eyes.

“What do you expect things would have been like when you were not around?” I summarized my condition in the form of a rhetorical question.

She blushed.

“Well, we’re getting late for our classes. We must leave. See you then”, she said as she took my hand and softly pressed it between both her hands. She walked towards the staff room for her daily prefect chores.

The bell for recess rang and students jumped out of their seats. I

saw a beautiful smiling face peeping from the class window as the teacher walked out of the class. Her innocent deeds always made me smile whole-heartedly. Sunaina and Shanaya jumped forward to greet her. She kept talking to them but regularly established compassionate eye contacts with me which made both of us smile.

"Let's reach the canteen before the noise from my stomach humiliates you all", Karan grabbed me and Aniket by the shoulder and we marched out of the room. I saw her glance following me from the corner of my eye. Seeing her noticing me made me feel good. But going away from her, brought in me separation anxiety.

Recess got over and we went back to the class. Students were enjoying the *extended recess* time. Anamika had not yet left the class. She walked out as I walked in. She hooked her little finger into mine and murmured something that I couldn't understand. The teacher entered and banged the class table, giving her final command to settle down. Again I was caught in the trap of time where nothing bound my interest. I was physically there, mentally lost and my heart was in the adjacent room.

School ended with zero knowledge retention on my part. I and my chuddy buddies cracked jokes as we walked towards the school gate. I saw Anamika standing with Sunaina and Shanaya, chit chat was on! Another loving eye contact and a smile. How I loved those moments!

The insti was not very far off from the school and I, thus, usually walked to the insti after school whenever I had my classes. So, I was not in a hurry to catch the school bus unlike others, and Anamika lived two blocks away from the school, so no school bus for her as well.

We bade goodbye to our 'school bus friends'.

"Insti today?" she came to me.

I nodded in reply and smiled.

"I told mum that I need to join an insti", she began the conversation.

"Oh! Yes, you must join one. It is high time", I said in a commanding voice, perhaps I overdid it. She laughed.

"I know idiot! And I am planning to join your insti. Is it good enough?" She said and winked at me.

I could hardly absorb the thought of being with her even while studying. Suddenly, insti seemed like my building of pilgrimage.

Anamika in my insti, sitting beside me. My daydreaming knew no boundaries. I hardly had any complaints from life. Without a doubt and a thought, she joined my batch. We walked together to the insti when we had classes and to her house to drop her when we didn't. Our relation was growing. But our romance was totally deprived of phonic conversations, good night and good morning messages, calls,

etc. But I was content in what I had. Or maybe I wasn't.

"Mock test is on Sunday. Those who have prepared well in advance, will be benefitted. Those scoring less than the standard score would have the privilege of inviting their parents to our institute for tea", Our teacher shot his bullet of this test and eyed me intensely. I had lately not been very attentive in my classes. Self study sessions got ended in daydreaming only.

School was no less. Friends had started suspecting something fishy.

"Hi Aaaaaarav!" Shanaya drastically spoiled my name with her fake accent.

"Oh! Hi", I turned back to find the escape door.

"You seem pretty occupied these days, school, studies, assignments, tests, institute, long walks, hand in hand…", I immediately looked at her in amazement.

Sunaina joined her, "seems like Aarav has no time for friends huh?"

And the girls chuckled at my embarrassed expression.

"Nothing like that, we are just friends", I explained.

"Ahaan, nothing like that…I have heard this somewhere", Sunaina taunted.

"Who are just friends? We just said you don't talk to us much", the guys joined them in the whole mockery. They ribbed me a lot, and turned me speechless. I could only laugh with them. It became a daily routine of my friends to tease me by her name. They would suddenly shout her name and laugh at me when I turned to look back. Their pranks knew no bounds.

Days passed in the same way. Our long chats continued, not on phone obviously, but at times for sure. When no one was at home, I used to call her for long hours from our landline phone. I always kept stealing Vaibhavi's phone to text her with a post script: Do not reply back! I had now told her that my family was quite reserved on issues like chatting late at night especially when JEE is round the corner. So I was advised to shut my mobile service by then.

"I don't want to go!" she said babyishly as we reached the insti on a rainy evening. "Where? Class?" I raised my eyebrow on her fickleness.

"Hmmmm", She crumpled her wet lips together. A cool breeze comprising a few tiny droplets blew off her hair. She tied them back, clenching her clip in the middle of her lips. She wiped the droplets as I continuously stared at her.

"Hello!" she brought me back to life waving her hand on my face.

"Oh! I was just thinking that skipping the class isn't that bad an idea", I smiled.

“Your parents?” I asked.

“Mom and dad come back after 8:00 and bhaiya is not in the city. So I have to be back by 7:00 pm. Four hours to go!” Her eyes glittered.

“So what’s the plan?” I said.

“Ummm.. You decide, I’ll follow”, she took my soul away.

“Okay, India Gate?” I quizzed.

“Not bad, weather definitely compliments your plan”, she said as we sprinted towards the metro station.

We started another date with the metro travel, observing people and laughing at them. We received glares from all around and we replied correspondingly.

“This is so beautiful!” she said as we gazed at the India gate touching the overcast skyline.

It was indeed beautiful. Mob gathered to witness this rare scene at the heart of Delhi. Mostly couples like us!

“Ice cream?” I asked.

“Wallet?” she chuckled.

“Shut up Shona! Not empty this time, tell me which one?”

“Black current swirl”, she ordered.

We went to the vendor.

I opened my wallet, and loved my dad!

I loved the way she mopped a cute little moustache made on her upper lip by the ice cream with her tongue.

We giggled and shared a lot of things, bitched about classmates and talked non-sense for hours.

She played a few romantic songs in her cell phone making the aura more romantic. We clicked a few pictures and deleted at the same time.

“It’s 5:00 Aarav! I think we should leave only then we will be able to reach by 7 at home”, she raised her sharp eyebrows and her eyes twinkling.

“Hmmmm .. lets go!” I said munching a chip.

The sky turned deep blue, a typical Delhi rainy evening. The smell after rain! I love it!

“But we still have an hour I guess, I mean if we leave by 6 we would be able to reach home in time. Connought palace?” I suggested and she smiled.

We walked around both the inner and outer circles of Cannought palace. Our fingers were intertwined by now. We held hands till they got all sweaty.

“Next is your station”, I said as I left her hand in the Metro.

“We still have two more minutes”, she held my hand again as I smiled at her compassionately.

She debarked as we shared the last glimpse for the day. One of

the best days of my life ended as I reached my house at 7:00 pm.

"Oh! Come in", Vaibhavi said as she opened the door habitually.

"Must be tired No? How was your Chemistry Class?" she asked stressing on Chemistry leaving me confused.

"Mom, give your child something to eat, he must be hungry", she yelled again.

"What happened Vaibhavi? Want any favor?" I chuckled.

"Me, No! But you're soon going to ask for the same to me". she gave a devilish smile. Actually she smiled normally, anyways, whatever. I was not getting her exactly.

"So, you dint answer? How was your class?" she asked again as mom came in.

"It was good! Learnt a few more things about chemistry", I said sarcastically.

"Now just for god'S sake stop yelling lies Aarav! There was No class today!" Mom said.

"And who told you that?" I mumbled.

"Your insti supervisor called to inform that there is no class today. Now tell us where you were?"

"Came straight home, why?" I swallowed. Has she let loose some spy on me?

"Do you know my friend Sucheta?"

"That tall filthy girl who can beat you in gossip?"

"Just shut up!"

"Yes, I do know her, why are you asking such random questions."

"Oh! So let me give you one sharper blow. She lives near Cannought palace."

Now, that literally blew life out of me. But as some wise man once said-never say die, I tried to be innocent. Vaibhavi screamed and I was clueless what to say on this. Walking hand in hand on Delhi streets automatically draws attention of people to you. Here, people are keenly interested in making you popular. This was my turn to claim some fame.

"So? What do I have to do with her residential address? Look I am really tired. I have to study a lot. I guess I must have some rest and get back to studies."

"Aarav you better only concentrate on your studies rather than wasting your time after useless relationships."

I could barely manage to stand on my feet as she divulged out the scenario straight on my face. She gave me a my-eyes-are-on-you look and handed me over my plate like one gives leftovers to a stray dog. She got back to her room, slamming the door behind her.

This is life, you cannot escape what it throws at you. You can't quit, you can't step back. You have to play your gamble until the last

breath. I really wished to see this Sucheta for once. I wondered how it would be like to catch her red handed in a stripping club. Since I had no intentions of visiting one, I instantly dropped the idea.

I got back to bed maintaining bad looks on my face after the whole argument.

It was sharp 1:00am, world was asleep. I looked around and stole Vaibhavi's phone and changed the sim. It was my phone now for the whole night.

9 messages received. I scrolled down and saw three messages from Anamika's number.

"*I'm missing you! :)*"

"*had a great day with you, do reply*"

"*okay don't reply back, Ignore me! Huh!*"

I texted her back "*u dere?*"

Though it was not the time but let me tell you, our youth starts its day at 12 midnight.

And yes she was awake. I got her reply within seconds.

"*Oh! Finally a message from you Mr. Sharma*"

I typed "I love you", but my thumb shivered before pressing the send button. I replaced it with a softer "I miss you!" As soon I was pressing the send button I saw Vaibhavi coming out of her room.

I escaped and cleared the text. I deleted the whole conversation.

Soon she went away after drinking water, unaware of the whereabouts of her phone, and I was back.

"*What happened?*" she messaged, she really was restless I concluded.

"*I'm missing Manali badly*", I initiated.

"*but I 'm missing some one else more than manali*"

"*Who?*" I knew it was obvio me, but the fun lies in asking obvious questions when you're in love.

"*shut up! You know*", she replied.

"*tell me no :P*", I teased her.

"*bhaiya is awake and mocking at me, I'm going to sleep, felt good you msgd atleast. Bad timing though*!" she texted.

"*Okay, gunnyt! Take care love you*", I erased the last two words and messaged her finally. I gazed at the mobile screen to witness another message from her but slept finally being disappointed.

Weeks passed. We walked together for classes, skipped a few for fun, had a taste of every next street food vendor in Pitampura. Our love grew and life after love took a romantic turn with each passing day. I had no clue that Sunday was near and so was an invitation for the tea party. As if I could do anything in one day and left it all on God. During the test, I randomly marked the answers on the OMR

sheet and drew cartoons depicting her and me, making hearts, and showing it to her every now and then. I was crazy in love, no doubt. The results were out the very next day.

"Anamika Roy. Kindly come forward", sir announced as he picked up an answer sheet.

"Oh lord, if he says anything wrong to my girl, I am literally going to leave his insti. A bad score is no reason for humiliating an innocent girl like that. Marks are no criteria for assessment", I murmured to myself.

Anamika got up and went to the front passing via few geeks.

"You have topped the batch. Good job girl. Keep it up!" The students clapped for her like toddlers do.

I laughed at myself for being so stupid.

"Aarav Sharma", I attended my roll call and stood up.

So, I have got the second highest marks. Well, not bad.

I walked in confidence appreciating my luck as I winked at Anamika as she returned back.

"Do your parents like coffee or tea?"

"Sir?"

"You are one of the rare students who have scored a little more than zero in this test. Fortunately, you are the only one of this species in this batch. Kindly tell your parents to come and meet me tomorrow. A call will be made to ensure that they do come, incase you 'forget' to tell them about the same." Baby laughter.

Well, dad did come for tea, and the mock test mocked my family life.

"You must pay some attention to your studies right now. It is a crucial stage dear", Anamika said as we climbed up the insti stairs.

"I am trying Shona", I said and made a face.

"If I am being a distraction, I'd better change the insti. Because in future it'll neither help you, nor me."

"No no, please, it is not like that. Okay! I promise to pay attention to studies this time but don't say all these things at least."

I did try and improved a bit in the next mock test. So, I finally got permission from dad to be a part of the teacher's day celebrations at school.

Judgment day ~

Another day I awaited for a long while- the teachers' day finally arrived.

I was expecting her to wear the saree of colour I had suggested. I woke up a bit early today than predicted by my mom. I badly needed to look handsome to match Anamika in her beauty aspects. I knew I would never, though!

And a big thanks to my fashion designer, fashion disaster rather- my sister, for getting me a pair of smart gray trousers and a pink shirt! She forced me to wear it and assured that I would look good. Imagine a tall guy, not too fair, only a bit good-looking, comes to his darkest shades when hot outside, loopholes around armpits wearing a PINK shirt! Arghhh! How would I look? What should I do? Should I skip the day and stay at home?

Questions and confusion early morning are ominous. I spent over an hour in bathroom that day, just rubbing and scrubbing my face. I bet I had scratched out multiple layers of my skin that day for sure. I rubbed and looked in the mirror and repeated the steps. Vaibhavi banged the door continuously asking me to come out as she needed to go to her college but I ignored her. Nothing was more important than me looking good. She even threatened me to crush my shirt but when she said that she won't be lending her cell phone to me for the day, I just ran out of the bathroom almost touching her feet! She knew the weak links of my chain.

I came out and pleaded "Vaibhavi look outside, it's not at all cloudy today", I said giving the most innocent looks possible. She just jerked me out of her way and went inside the bathroom, slamming the door on my face.

I waited for her and thought of the influencing lines I would throw at her when she comes out.

I wore that pink shirt, tucking it in my trousers, the most horrible combo one can imagine. I had no matching shoes, I was so busy with

my institute classes and extra classes that week, that I even dint bother to shave, though I did it today, keeping a small goatie.

"Vaibhavi?" I said as she came out.

"Look Aarav, I need to go to college. Already you have wasted my time with your bathroom activities, and ya forget my phone, I'm going out today".

"With Vishal, you're going on a hangout with Vishal?" I almost shouted so that mom could hear easily.

"Shut up you .. ", she said.

"See I'm the only one who knows about your relationship, so I was wondering if you can lend me the phone today", I smirked.

"Even I can blackmail you with those Pitampura hangouts, but I have something called humanity ". She clenched her jaw, threatened me and handed me over her phone "Only for today!"

"Till you and Vishal are together", I laughed.

"We will be always! And yes once mom's phone gets repaired, do whatever you want to. For now, please spare me", she roared and left.

Sometimes knowing secrets helps you, especially when they are about people like her. I came to know about her relationship with Vishal through some love letters I found while searching for my chemistry notes. She regrets keeping them in my books, hoping I never open them. She didn't know, I keep my savings there only.

Vishal, her mate, was a fair, average in height IITian. Vaibhavi wanted me to get inspired and become like him. He was actually not of our caste, a SC if I know correctly and Brhamin-SC would never unite especially for things like marriage even in 21st century. Well, all I had to bother about now was MY phone. The last problem was my attire which could not be solved in any possible way. I changed the sim card. I dressed quickly as Sunaina was coming to pick me, another display of my deprived personality.

Sunaina buzzed me. We got together at my gate.

She wore a peacock coloured saree. Undoubtedly, she was looking hot. Slim, fair, straight black hair and blue eye-liner was just display of a perfect dressing sense.

"We're going to pick Shanaya too", Sunaina said as my eyes widened.

"What? But why? Pick Anamika instead", I said. She laughed.

Chattering, we reached Shanaya'spalce, a big house indeed. As she came out my tongue too did droop out. I laughed within on my hardship, she was looking awesome!

A black saari, deep neck, backless half-sleeve shiny blouse, a long pearl necklace, and her tattoo! Perfect!

My intentions were not at all pure that very time. She just took something off, the way she walked, ahh!

As she got inside the car, her fragrance created a different aura. I was going off the track. Anamika!

“Hello Sunaina, looking nice, nice pendent haan!” Shanaya exclaimed as they both started complimenting each other just like all girls do, a formality if you ask me. They don’t mean it, seriously.

“Hey Aarav!” Shanaya said as she placed her hand on my shoulder. The sensation was good but not magical like when Anamkia does the same.

I shrugged and moved her hand aside. We left again and reached the school in next fifteen minutes.

I combed my hair with fingers only and adjusted my shirt. I looked around for Anamika. People passed by, staring at my shirt. At the same time I saw Anamika entering the school premises. Now I’m fed up of giving her descriptions of her looking beautiful, I was speechless this time. But still I needed to say something, and I said that to myself “I love you, Anamika”.

A maroon saree, draped in Bengali style, hair down. She walked down in high heels, clutching her saree plates. She seemed baffled with her outfit. Unable to hold a saree and high heels together. No specs today but lenses. I was glad to see her wearing the color I suggested. I felt valued for the first time in my life.

“Hi Sunaina, looking good”, Anamika said as she ignored me.

Am I seriously looking like a nerd? I asked within. Yes! Was the reply I got.

“You too are looking gorgeous”, Sunaina exclaimed as I nodded in agreement, though no one noticed.

She addressed me upside down as I was lost in her beauty. I felt I was going through a stage of seizure attacks every second.

“Hey”, I said as Sunaina went for Aniket and Shanaya for nobody.

She raised her eyebrows in reply.

“What happened?” I asked.

“You know what, there is a thing called courtesy. I don’t know how one can be so busy that he keeps his phone switched off the whole day. I thought I would come with you to school today, but perhaps you had other choices. I’m sick, ain’t I?” She yelled in one breath.

I loved that too, the way she spoke each and every word. I was bounded in lies, unable to express the truth of my deprived personality. My family had not adjusted themselves in the era where a baby passing out from his mothers’ womb is eligible to have a cell phone.

Her cheerless face shook me out of my own despair. She was looking a bit upset, something wrong in the other way.

As the day went on, Students gathered in showy attires, guys

looking ok! But girls were looking hot indeed in saree, some wore deep neck, some wore sleeveless and fortunately some wore back less.

But my eyes were stuck upon Anamika only. Every impious desire was overpowered by a feeling called love. I was making up my mind to propose her today for a relationship. Officially, *in* my senses!

I knew she loved me too but still I needed a verbal approval.

Juniors began the morning with some cultural programmes and speeches, boring!

My eyes rolled and jammed at Anamika ultimately. She, being the coordinator, was busy in her duties.

I decided to talk to her in person, but people and time didn't let me do that. Finally Aniket and Sunaina spared some time from each other and joined us. Aniket was indeed looking handsome. He was rich, must have appointed high level cosmetics agents to make the beauty out of him in any way. Now to be frank, Karan was a total faux pas. He was bulky guy and to add on to his ugliness, he wore a tight fitted trouser, pointed shoes and striped shirt. We laughed hard when we saw the jaat boys Rahul and Oshit. They wore formals and sport shoes! No words, just a chuckle to share on this outfit.

Finally after the assembly function we all headed towards our classes. Shanaya too joined as Rahul followed her, with a wagging tail.

"So what's the plan for today, let us hang out at Saket", Aniket offered. Anamika sat quietly on the window side, not responding to anything. I was concerned. I don't know but I was blaming myself for the whole time without knowing the actual reason.

"So who all are in for the plan?"

I waited for Anamika, as everyone raised hands except me and her.

"What about you people?" Karan inquired.

"Anamika!" Sunaina jerked her.

"I can't come, some important stuff to do. Sorry guys", Anamika exclaimed still ignoring my presence. Now my heartbeat started rising exponentially.

"C'mmon Anamika, it's a rare evening of our life. Get some life you bookworms", Aniket tried to convince her as I kept quite on this.

Aniket was clever and his "rare moments and now or never", phenomena were nothing but a conspiracy to ruin the other person.

"And you are automatically out then", Karan shrieked at me.

"Nothing like that Karan, just not feeling well", now this time I tried to be clever. This statement had a purpose. Anamika finally looked at me and her worried looks expressed concern. I winked at her, and she tried hard to smile but something restricted her. I was feeling desperate and restless. We needed some time together. Everyone insisted a lot without a positive feedback from our side.

Now when everyone was leaving for Saket, we both were somehow allowed to spend some time together, alone. Our parents knew that we had celebrations in school, so we were free for next few hours.

They left us making faces. We had to bear it for each other anyhow. Now this was the time I waited for since we met the last time!

"So?" I asked Anamika in her ear, as she bid goodbye to all of them.

"So?" she echoed.

"I mean, where are going?" I asked, anticipating a plan from her.

"Anywhere, just want to clear things today. I'm feeling so blocked Aarav", she said as questions rushed through my little mind. Did she too want a relationship? I felt excited, but her expressions conveyed something else. Nonetheless, we decided to go to Metro Walk, hoping Aniket and party were not there to thrill us more. Silence on both sides from picking up an auto, travelling for straight fifteen minutes. We walked in. My restlessness increased with the passing time.

She was trying to get a hold on her saree. Her anklet fell down on the floor while walking, as I finally broke the silence.

"What is the matter Anamika? You look a bit disturbed" and I picked her anklet. "Hmmm, let's go there. Keep it with you, I'll take it later", she pointed at a bench situated near the lake inside the Metro Walk.

The weather was pleasant. I pocketed her anklet and got back to her. She looked somewhere in the water and sighed. Her waving locks of hair were killing me slowly.

"Look Aarav, I want to share something with you", she said still looking deep inside the lake.

"Aarav, you don't know what am I going through since I have met you. It's not like what it was before you. Things have changed for me, priorities have changed for me, but at the same time it is unacceptable for me and for everyone. I mean I think…You're just not… good for me. I'm not good enough for you!", she said as I froze where I sat. I saw a tear falling down from her eye as she started howling within.

"What do you …", I yelled.

"My brother loves a girl who is not Bengali, she is a Brahmin like you."

"First of all, please calm down, and tell me everything."

"My dad slapped my brother when he told us that he could not marry

the girl they chose for him, because he was in a relationship from past three years when he was in Chennai. My dad had a minor attack last night. After all that drama, I was so scared. I was calling you, but you never responded", she sobbed as she narrated the scenario.

"I'm so sorry Anamika, actually my phone… I mean I don't have the phone with me. I mean I have one but mom doesn't give it to me more often and it's always not easy to get what is not yours", I said that line ironically, still not telling her the truth as she semi-hugged me and cried.

"I'm so sorry", I said as I rubbed her back to commiserate her.

"Is your dad okay now?"

She nodded getting her away from me. People stared at us as expected.

"What happened next?" I questioned.

"Nothing. My brother had to follow dad's verdict. We would have lost him otherwise", she stated.

"So this means, we don't have any future?" I asked in stupor.

"Aarav! Please, this will never lessen my love for you", she cried. "What do you want to say? I'm getting mad for you each day Anamika, and now you want to say that we cannot make into a relationship ever because your brother is unable to surpass your dad's orthodoxy? Atleast they should give us a chance, not now, may be after few more years. I mean, how we can decide all this by now, it is totally unfair Shona!" I paused to look at her reaction. She didn't respond to this. So, I continued, "I mean if I'm not a Bengali, does this mean we both aren't good enough for each other. This thought is suffocating me", I uttered the unorganized words that randomly came to my mind.

"It's not about my brother Aarav! It's all about my dad's life and his struggle which let both of us here, where we are today. You know, he came to Delhi from Kolkata thirty years ago with not even a single penny in his pocket. Somehow, he studied, did part time jobs to earn and got us the life we are living today. I have seen him counting single coins in times of need. I'm not that rich enough Aarav! We live in a rented flat, now my brother has started earning and he has shifted to Chennai. Soon I will also be living up there", She said as tears flooded my eyes. I looked away in silence!

"Please! Say something, Aarav. I wanted to tell you, but the

circumstances never allowed", she pleaded.

I turned around to tell her about every feeling my heart nurtured, what I felt for her in past few months, how special the moments spent with her were, everything. May be, I was going to propose her, despite having a fair idea of her answer.

"Look, I'm a simple guy. I speak things simply and understand everything in the same way. This is the first time I started thinking differently, just because of you! This entire journey of our relation, I kept thinking that I should tell you how much I love you and if you think I'm okay for you then let's get into a relationship. We will breeze through life together just like past few months". I looked up in the sky trying to restrict tears from falling down.

I breathed heavily and continued.

"God kept building up my confidence throughout for this day. And then when we got here, HE CHANGED THE ENTIRE STORY". I said as tears came automatically. I did my best to stop myself but this was something very unusual for me to happen. "You must be wondering, why am I telling you all this right now? Please don't get me wrong in any way, don't go on these water droplets, they are just …", I sighed again.

"And there's nothing between us, nor can there ever be. But I want to tell you that whenever, wherever you need a friend, just remember that there is a guy always behind you, who will give his life for you". Now that was pretty mature of me. I don't know why I accepted everything that very moment and talked like that.

"But Anamika, even after knowing your answer, I still want to say that I … ", someone interrupted me from behind as I was about to utter my feelings.

"Anamika!" I heard a hoarse male voice. I turned around and saw a guy coming towards us as Anamika stood up on seeing him. She started shivering as I looked at her, wondering what was going on.

"Kishnendu?" Anamika murmured.

"Hey Anamika, what are you doing here? I was going at your place only! Just came to shop a bit", the guy spoke, claiming her by the shoulder.

I went forward to undo that gesture but before that Anamika said something.

"Aarav! This is Kishnendu!" she said looking down.

He moved his hand towards me as we shook hands with uncertainty.

"Kishu, he was just dropping me home. Our friends just left from here. We were too … ", she was interrupted by Kishnendu.

"It's okay dear. Now that I'm here, let's go now. I've got my car."

Kishnendu said as he moved away in a hurry, clutching her hand. My temper was on cloud nine. I thought of lending my first punch ever on his ugly face. He was shorter than me, a bit fatso, specs, dark like every other roadside Romeo. But who was he? Why was he behaving like that with Anamika? Why did she stop me?

"You go Kishu, I'm coming in a few minutes", she said. Kishnendu shrugged and walked away.

"Who was he?" I asked as he went a bit farther from us.

"He is a family friend from Kolkata. He has come with his father to Delhi to meet our family for…"

"For?" I questioned.

"For *bhaiya's* marriage" She said and looked away. Before I could asked her why he talked to her like he is some ass who mattered, that nerd came back.

"Mr. Aarav, Anamika has told me how good as a 'friend' you're to her. But can I please take away your friendly-hang-out-time and take her with me?". He said adding a laugh, literally not required at that particular moment. I seriously would have smashed his pale teeth for spoiling my moments with her.

"I wish she could have stayed longer." I looked at Anamika who was still trying to compose herself.

"Aarav, why am I getting an impression that you've fallen in love with her?" He said with another chuckle.

"What is love? I don't know. But yes, I do wish from the bottom of my heart that Anamika never has tears in her eyes and she must always keep smiling", I said adding a fake smile for her.

"If that's what you call love, then Love it is", I said looking straight into his eyes.

Kishnendu intensely eyed me.

"If you think of this as nothing, it's better. For the truth is that, I'm nothing to her more than a friend", I smirked.

He raised his eyebrow at my reply.

"Goodbye, let's go Anamika!" He left as we shared eyes for the last time. I smiled at her but she seemed constrained within her thoughts. And she left!

Just for moments existed the story of our hearts, then we went our own separate ways.

I saw her leaving, they both left. I stood there only for hours, crying! Was that a monsoon of dreams for me, which ended by its nature, or did I find a beautiful world that never existed! I took out her anklet out of my pocket and stared at it which took me back to the days we spent together, laughing, smiling and crying!

It became really dark and I realized I too have a place to go, my home. I was killed emotionally. Now I was going to be murdered,

literally. I reached my home and knocked.

Mom opened the door.

“Late again!” she shouted at me.

I just stepped in and looked down, to avoid any eye contact with her. I had no strength left in me to explain my swollen red eyes and my glum mood.

“Wait!” mom shrieked. “Are you okay?” she inquired in the most polite tone I had ever heard from her.

I nodded.

“Hungry?”

“Go and have some rest”, She patted my shoulder and caressed my hair.

I loved my mom a lot. She knew when it is right to stay quiet and leave me alone. She did sympathise, her ways were different. Only mothers can do that.

I walked towards my room, but turned towards Vaibhavi’s room. I knocked. She was perhaps busy with studies.

“Wait, coming”, She opened the door.

“Oh. It’s you. I thought it’s mom. Yes?” She looked at me.

“I guess you must come in and talk”, she finally concluded. I must have been looking really horrible.

I walked in and placed her phone on the study table

Anamika’s face flashed upon in front of my eyes and my heart became heavy. Tears rolled down my eyes again.

“Are you okay?” Vaibhavi placed her hand lightly on my shoulder.

“Need a talk?”

Yes she was irritating at times, but she was a wonderful sister. She immediately forgot her grudges against me and provided me comfort.

I knew her secrets. So, I felt, I could easily trust her with mine. She stayed calm and lent her ears to me till I felt stable in next few hours, I told her everything.

“Sometimes, you just cannot do anything about situations dude. You have to let things go. She cannot risk the life of her father for her selfish interests. God forbid, if I am faced with such a situation, I would also prefer my family first, no matter how much I love Vishal”, She trembled as she empathised with me.

“But .. “

Her actually placing herself in that situation and delivering a conclusion really brought respect and trust for her in my heart. But is it that easy to forget things? Will it be so easy to move on? To see someone taking away my life, just because I was not a Bengali? Are caste, religion, creed above a bond of affection, trust and care between

two hearts?

Thousand questions bothered me, until the tears dried up and I fell asleep with no dreams, no vision of future. Just with a faint hope, that things will get better.

Loser I was.

But an optimist.

Till life broke me down. Completely.

Fish the hitch!

Sundays bring forth gloomy mornings and tired faces. I woke up with severe body pain. Sleeping on the floor may be one reason. No tears now, only pain, a pain so severe that could turn my chest inside out.

The whole day I lied in my room looking outside the window constantly saying No to mom and her offerings. Only regular visits from Vaibhavi, expressing concern and for motivation distracted me from looking at the never-so-interesting gulmohar tree outside the window. I wondered if birds making nest on this tree too had to know the caste of the tree before setting their homes on it. I was amused by the idea.

“Why don’t you try to distract yourself by doing something that you like to do. Something like, go out with friends”, Vaibhavi suggested.

“Umm, just a bit too tired for any activity”, I grimaced.

Vaibhavi placed the plate of food in front of me and gave a surrendering expression. Meanwhile dad entered my room.

“You don’t have your insti today?” Dad asked in a gruff voice.

“I simply forgot about it. I guess I’ll be late if I leave now. So, maybe I can skip today”, I said and waited.

“Get up and change. I am dropping you. You won’t be late”, Dad concluded and left.

“Are you paying serious attention to studies?” Dad asked on our way to insti.

I simply nodded my head.

Dad patted my shoulder. “We expect a lot from you, don’t let us down. You won’t, would you?” He looked at me with optimistic eyes.

I gulped.

“Dad, stop the car there. I’ll come back by metro”. I bade goodbye to dad, escaping his hopeful eyes.

Like always, I have no idea what was taught in the insti, but

because of totally different reasons. Anamika had skipped insti today. I wondered why, but I had no guts to call her and ask. I didn't have the phone too.

The day was down in the dumps and the night was restless. Eyes remained moist throughout.

Why am I not a Bengali? Why can't I eat the fish? Things would have been much simpler, much more wonderful without these hitches. Life would have been heaven and Anamika would have been mine. The thoughts made me curse my existence in a society ruled by narrow minds and where caste and religion eclipse the power of love. With these thoughts, I somehow dragged the night.

Next morning at school was not the usual one. My friends were busy whispering into each other's ears. I could not make out the reason, neither did I try to find out. Sunaina approached me.

"Hi Aarav!" she said in a low tone.

"Oh hi!" I replied with a fake smile.

"Tell me one thing honestly, will you?"

I eyed her in confusion.

"Do you like her?" she threw the question at me.

"What?" I said, gaining no sense of her words.

"Do you like her? We all know what's going on, okay? So please, tell me. Are you serious about her?"

I just looked down.

"I just want to tell you that I can see it in your eyes, what you have for…"

"Hi Aaaaarav!" Shanaya interrupted the conversation. First time ever I was really thankful to her for that.

"Hi", I said forthright and looked elsewhere.

"You seem pretty busy these days, no time for me…I mean, no time for friends, eh?" She taunted and pulled my cheek. I stepped back.

Sunaina eyed her indifferently and left me alone with a live wire.

Classmates started moving out for prayer.

"I guess we are getting late for the prayer, we must go", I said as I turned to put my bag down.

"So, umm…how was I looking on teacher's day?"

I turned back, almost all students had already gone. I walked in the direction of the door. Shanaya blocked my way.

"Don't you think it is rude not to reply when you have been asked a polite question?" she said and stopped me by placing her hand on my chest.

"Shanaya!" I said sternly and stepped out.

"Oh come on Aarav, I just want to spend a bit of time with you", She clutched my hand.

“We can do that after the prayer.” I jerked her away.

“Oh come on Aarav, I know you like me. I have been noticing you while checking me out, from the first day. The trip, you were too shy to ask me to sit with you.” She chuckled. “You know what, you are just so cute. I really like you”, She said and placed her hand on my cheek. I trembled.

“Stop shying away. Look, I am taking the initiative!” she gave a seductive smile, but I was far too dejected to get seduced. I made another attempt to move her away, but she caught my hand and put it on her waist. I retreated.

“Oh come on Aarav. You don’t get chances like that daily, do you?” She pulled my hands and again placed them on her burning body.

My state of mind was already really exotic these days. To add to it, Shanaya had come up with her crap to ruin my life further. I finally made up my mind to push her rudely and move out of the room.

I saw someone at the door which further brought a high voltage shock to my body. Anamika stood there with moist eyes.

“I…was just on duty. Umm, sorry…”, she left.

“Goddamn, we must have shut the door. Fortunately, she is not that gossip queen. I know, she won’t tell it to anyone”, I stood there, frozen as Shanaya hugged me from the back.

“Enough girl, move away!” I said it out loud enough to caste an impact on her for a long time.

I pushed her away and went out. She perhaps banged against the seat and I didn’t care at all.

I need to talk to Anamika. This was the only thought that came into my mind repetitively. Prayer got over and Anamika started looking for defaulters. She had a blank face, I had never seen her so expressionless. Sorrow, it signified deep pain. She came towards me and didn’t look up into my eyes.

“I need to talk to you about that”, I spoke.

“You may go. No faults,”, she walked away from me.

I had a strong urge to hold her, and hug her. I knew words were not required then. But I was now not eligible for such a gesture.

So I just kept my urges to myself and decided not bother her with that at all.

I entered the insti that day and looked around for seat. The class was full of geeks but one seat was empty and that too for me. Anamika was sitting alone.

The lecture went on, I looked at her from the corner of my eye but she was looking straight at the professor. She definitely had moist eyes. I knew I had hurt her badly. But I had no option. I myself was

pretty distressed.

I took my notebook and opened the last page, it had our conversations and a few sessions of tic tac toe that we played together during the uninteresting chemistry periods. We rather enriched our own chemistry.

“Please talk!” I wrote. She wasn’t looking at me at all.

I tore the page and kept it in front of her.

She gave it a glance and ignored. She left as soon as the class got over. She had her dad to receive her. I couldn’t talk.

“What’s up dude?” Aniket addressed me with a light punch on my shoulder.

“Nothing much”. I reverted with a blank expression as I searched for Anamika in the corridor.

“Lucky guy you are!” He began.

I laughed at the irony of his statement.

“Shanaya likes you man! I mean, the world is after her, and look who has she chosen! YOU ass! You have done some real good deeds in the previous birth”, He said and laughed.

“Will you just stop it? You know I am not interested in her. And this ends here!”

“Are you kidding me? You are NOT INTERESTED? Shanaya Taneja-the most desirable, hot, sexy chic is after you, and you are letting her go just like that? Don’t tell me you are that serious about that nerd girl that you’ll miss the chance to grab this babe”.

“Aniket, I want you to shut your mouth here and now”, He was now getting onto my nerves.

“Aarav, man, this opportunity comes to rare people. Trust me, if I were you, I would not have given it a second thought to leave Sunaina and say yes to Shanaya”, He started uttering all shit that his mind could possibly create.

“Really?” Sunaina stood behind Aniket as he finished off his last sentence.

So that is how a love story ended in one small conversation. I have no idea what happened next. Just saw his status being changed from ‘in a relationship’ to ‘single’ when I logged in to make mine ‘it’s complicated’. I personally feel, Aniket well deserved this for even taming a thought like that.

Anamika did not come to the insti from the following day. My only interaction with her was possible in school. And there, she did not talk.

Time passed pretty quickly, and I was ruined at a faster rate.

School tests were something I never bothered about, but insti tests called for tea parties and that had a deep impact on me. Situations were having their impact on me, this had an impact on my concentration, which further had a negative impact on my studies and scores. This led to a deep impact on my parents and they tried to create situations to caste a lasting impact on me. You see, the impact circle.

School had become all the more dreadful with no conversations with Anamika. I showed her that I was okay with it, but somewhere, even she knew the reality.

Another day, another disaster. Sunaina informed me that Anamika was going on a leave because of her brother's marriage. So, now I won't be able to see her as well. Punish me as hard as you can Almighty! I well deserve this for loving a girl truly who doesn't belong to my caste.

I had forgotten tears, annoyance ruled my behavior. I got irritated at the most little things.

No one in the family could tackle me. I answered back, bad enough to make people cry.

"Here's a text from Anamika", I was jolted out of my thoughts as Vaibhavi came up to me. Now she was supportive enough to lend me her phone. But life's never perfect. We didn't chat the way we used to when the phone wasn't accessible to me. I reminisced those days when I used to steal her phone to read Shona's 'miss you aarav☺'

"What? Give me the phone", I snatched it away.

You are cordially invited to the auspicious occasion of my brother's marriage on 23rd November at City Park Ceremonies that begin at 7:00pm. Kindly come and grace the occasion with your presence.

Regards,

Anamika Roy and family.

Such a formal invitation! I don't even know I got it or was it sent by mistake. I knew it was happening since everything got fixed, but such an invitation was unacceptable, I accepted it though. I decided to go and atleast see her. I would never miss a chance to see her. Maybe I would even get a chance to talk to her dad. Things can be mended. I saw a faint ray of hope in the dark tunnel I was living in from past one month.

First Kiss ~

The day had arrived after dragging three days without having heard of her. My heart refused to beat at its normal pace today.

Not a regular Sunday. I was going to grace Anamika's brother's marriage with my presence. I told my mom to arrange my slim fit cotton suit. I wanted to look good. I looked inside dad's almirah in search of some pricey item. Of course I was not in a very good mood, but of course I was in a much better state of mind as compared to the previous days of my life. Sunaina had been partially aware of the situations at Anamika's place. She had informed me that Anamika was leaving Delhi soon, forever. She had been a great support and source of information for me despite having faced a bad heart break.

Her 'leaving Delhi' thing had frozen my blood. I had a hope. So, I decided to wait as usual. I wondered, life would have been so easy if everything would have harmonized like Bollywood movies, where I would have easily booked two tickets for Shimla for me and Anamika and we would have spent our whole life there in peace. But this is reality where you have to wait for the right time to come, which fatefully never comes. I thought I would talk to her parents today about each and everything, although my mind stopped me from doing anything pointless.

"Heya, Ready?" Karan asked.

"Hmm, meet me in fifteen minutes. *Vishwavidyalaya* metro station!" I said in a low tone.

"Are you ok?" he asked.

"Hmmm..", I said and clicked. This was so impolite. I never behaved with people like I was behaving now a days. I was irritated, I was frustrated and I was in love. I left home without any announcement as my mother demanded. I was not in my senses. I was only thinking about the next step I was going to take on meeting her and her parents.

"Are you okay man?" Karan questioned as I entered his car.

“Nahh!” I ignored.

“The girl’s side must be rich? Eh?” Karan said, breaking the silence.

“Why?” I said looking outside the window, observing the pace of trees.

“Man! Do you have any idea about the venue? Are you going sick day by day?” he exclaimed.

“Why?” I repeated, now in a frustrated tone.

“You ARE sick!” he declared. “We are going to the City Park man! Imagine the ambiance, the food and most importantly the girls. I’m going wacky dude!” he added.

I don’t know even after being quite rich, why was he so excited about such materialistic things?

“Great!” I said and turned around.

We reached the venue-The City Park, big enough, lavish enough to hold high profile marriages! Though Anamika belonged to a middle class family, but the reason girls side approved of her brother was that he was an IITian. Moreover, he had agreed to live abroad with the girl, leaving his parents alone here. Greed has driven the world crazy. And I think I’m lucky that I have a place over here that I can call home.

Anyways, coming back to the City Park. We entered as we saw the board of hosts. It displayed

Mr. & Mrs. Subroto Das Gupto welcome you to the auspicious occasion of their daughter’s marriage

Sayanti das Gupto & Dibakar Roy

We entered as Aniket greeted us, as if he was the host. I had not yet forgiven him for what he had blurted about Anamika. I ignored him and moved on to get a glimpse of Anamika.

The banquet was lavish indeed. Big chandeliers, lights, luxuriant stuff all around. As I walked, I saw people near the stage. The marriage was going in a typically Bengali way. Non-veg all around, I was dying of its smell.

I sighed and turned my head to the other side to hear the conversations of the glittery ladies alias eye candies of the party.

“Nice girl, the groom’s side is lucky to have her.”

“Yeah, the girl is highly educated. I’ve heard she works in some reputed MNC.”

“What’s the use of such high education if she can not satisfy the hungry stomachs of her family?”

“What are you saying Mrs. Chaddha!”

“The girl lacks cookery skills, what is a girl without the knowhow of her kitchen?”

Suddenly, the lucky groom’s side became unlucky and cursed.

“Oh look who’s here! Congratulations Mrs. Roy, wedding bells for your son finally”, some lady cheerfully said.

“Nice girl ehh? Rich sophisticated family, the only child of her parents, lots of wedding gifts. You’ve the upper hand! After all you are the groom’s side, what all did you demand?”

“Oh Mrs. Chandra, we just loved the girl in the first meeting. She’s Bengali. What else one requires and demands? Dowry?”

“But who said its dowry? The bride’s side must have given some gifts to their own daughter. As a token of blessing and love, you know.”

“Ummm, well, I need to go. Loads of work.”

She soon left the kitty gossip and whispering started again.

“Look I told you, they aren’t getting anything, they formally refused once for the sake of courtesy, and they lost it forever.”

“Hmmm, if they would have given something, it would have been for their girl’s benefit only. But it’s ok, why should we bother?”

And their chit chat went on endlessly. They must have set an undetected fire in the heart of the groom’s mother. It’s not very difficult to poison the ears of Indian women.

I rolled my eyes as I saw Shona. She was draped in a cream colored saree again in a typical Bengali style. She was glittering like a pearl, beautiful as always. She didn’t look happy though. Officially, I was uninvited, I just received a message from her as an invitation. We were not in a regular touch from almost one month. But the memories we made together occupied my mind each and every second. I noticed some ass looking male standing beside her-Kishnendu. He looked funny in his off white colored dhoti-kurta.

I went forward to greet her. She saw me coming and turned her face away. Crush! My heart broke. It hurt really badly, but for me it was not end. I wondered why she was so fickle all the time, had she called me here to ignore my presence? Or maybe to make me feel all the more miserable by standing next to that hole, Kishnendu? Her ignorance was now luring hell out of me.

The wedding went on amazingly, and Anamika kept herself occupied. Karan and Aniket focused on the cuisines, drinks and girls not to forget! I just waited for an interaction with her. I was just looking at her, some or the other way. She was busy doing things, greeting people with a happy-dent smile on her face, but it lacked happiness.

Meanwhile we all went outside on the garden area, where the whole dinner thing was arranged and sat there. Cold November breeze flowed and chilled us.

“Hey Aniket”, Anamika said as she came there at my back. She

shook hands with both of them in partial annoyance. I did not turn back.

"I'm so sorry friends, I'm a bit occupied so.. I hope you can understand", she said.

"And what about Sunaina and Shanaya?" She asked Karan.

"Oh! Umm, their parents didn't allow them!" He justified.

"Ya but they have sent a bouquet and a very beautiful gift for you. It is in the car. I think we should get and give it to the couple now", Karan said, being so formal.

"By the way, this is Kishnendu, Kishnendu Banerjee, our family friend", she said to introduce that nerd to nerds. Now I turned back as they both stood behind. Kishnendu smiling horribly and Anamika stood next, completely in contrast to him. She stood so close to me after such a long time, angelic she was looking!

"Hey!" she said adding a smile. And I just replied back raising my eyebrows and a half smile.

"Hey Aarav!" Kishnendu said.

"Do you people know each other?" Karan said.

"Yes we do! Very well", I added and left to get a coffee uttering an 'excuse me'.

They talked for minutes, as I saw Kishnenedu leaving. Now three of them were alone.

I went back, "Hey Aarav, take my car keys and please get the gift and bouquet here. We will leave after giving it to her brother". Aniket requested as he grabbed his hopefully last serving of dessert.

"But it's a big thing to carry, I need someone?" I asked as Karan showed me a cutlet in his hand. Zombie he was.

"I will come", Anamika said, as my heart frisked beats.

"Yea, that's great! You people should go. Till then let me have some more dessert. Luscious food by the way Anamika", Aniket winked at her. She smiled back at the foodie.

She turned her gaze to me. I looked into her eyes, they pleaded to come.

"Okay let's go then", I said as I saw her smiling after a long time, a genuine smile. We both left for car parking behind the garden area.

We walked together, slower than ever. Passing together through a long way under lights and flowers, both in formals, I fantasized of my marriage day with her. Silly enough, but I did. Some steps forward but no words yet.

Finally she broke the silence. "How is your IIT preparation going on?"

Wow! What a question, I was indeed waiting for this from past one goddamn month!

“Good!” I replied, calming myself down as she shook her head in agreement.

Silence bounded us again except the DJ that played inside the hall, that too in a low intensity. The sound faded as we went ahead.

We reached the car parking in hardly five minutes of deep silence. We both noticed each other from the corner of our eyes.

I looked around for the car. It was dark all around. I searched and finally saw Karan’s white i20.

I headed forward as Anamika followed. I thought this meeting would also go in vain and I’ll die one day in depression. Only her thoughts clouded up my mind all the time. I wondered if she could empathize with me.

I opened the car to take out the bouquet and the gift pack and removed my blazer and placed it on the back seat of the car. Though, the parking lot was open and it was cold out there, still I felt a bit muggy. All of a sudden she broke this long graveyard silence.

“Please say something?” she said it at last.

“What?” I replied as I turned back. I felt a lump in my throat as I looked into her eyes. The moment of reunion made my heart overflow. Her innocent expression melted my heart.

“Anything, just anything”, she said looking straight into my eyes, her voice cracking with every letter.

“I have nothing to say but . . “, I said and sighed.

“Please, don’t do this to me. You know nothing is in my hands”, she almost cried. Her voice shivered and asked for support.

I left the door open, went closer to her and put my hand around her shoulders.

“Look Anamika, the past one month has been the toughest one for me. Knowing that you’re going to leave me one day, knowing that I’m always going to live with merely a few memories we both made together, was something that my heart refused to accept. That day, you saw me and Shanaya…”

“I have known Shanaya for a longer time than you do. You need not explain”, She interrupted and showed her trust in me.

Now who does that in today’s world? She believed in me, trusted me, blindly. This got my eyes brimming.

I held her hand in my hands and looked straight into her eyes. “I never ever thought that I would ever fall in love. And I never thought things would happen so quickly, that we would be left separated by the tide of time and circumstances”. My voice broke.

“I Love You Anamika”, I said, my mind and body were paralyzed, this time expecting an answer.

She didn’t utter a word but pushed herself towards me. I was baffled. She came slowly and hugged me slightly. She was pretty

shorter than me. Her face barely reached up to my neckline. She placed her ears on my chest. My heart maddened in response to her proximity. She intently listened to my fluctuating heartbeats. She clutched my shirt tightly, crisscrossing her hands over my back. Then she grasped my hands and placed them over her bare waist. I was traumatized for seconds. She turned up her face, looking into my eyes. The most wonderful smile one can witness, her chin dimpled. I couldn't resist a smile when I saw her smiling. I pulled her towards me. We were close enough to feel each other's breath. I was drenched in her fragrance.

She stood up high on her toes and stretched herself to get up to the level of my face. We both swayed into the moment madly. I could not sense anything else except her anaesthetizing aroma.

She kissed on my right cheek, still maintaining her outstretched posture.

Then she touched my lips with hers vaguely, a faint contact. It was something very eccentric. She breathed heavily and I could feel it on my skin. We shared heavy breaths for next few seconds.

I felt a little incited and brushed my lips against her cheek. Without breaking a contact, I claimed her lips. Soft as rose petals! Her hands grabbed my neck for support, and I seized her waist. I squeezed her bare back as soon as she grabbed me passionately. My hands spontaneously went over her bosoms, detaching her outfit. My hands rushed all over her body, and hers on mine. Her hair got untied. We kissed and kissed till we got back into life. We both moved on the back side of the car in the same position, our teenage hormones went wild!

She started moaning this time. She grasped me badly like she never wanted to leave. I kissed her nose, her lips, her neck, her forehead, her eyes, her ears, her cheeks and everything that got in my way. Intense it was. She replied in a better way though. I rested my hands on her back, trying to unhook her chemise. Who says life would have been better without hooks? For a first timer, pleasure lies in freeing the hooks.

We both were so lost in each other that we even forgot the circumstances hovering around us and in mind. She moaned even harder!

She pushed my hand aside, restricting me to open anything. I was so flown in sensuality.

We warmed each other in that wintry aura, till a heavy voice gave us a mini- heart attack.

I didn't bother to even look back, but Shona pushed me away insistently, compelling me to look back. And trust me it was worth looking.

Her dad stood right behind us!

The moment was so unexpected and dreadful that for seconds I was dead. My hand was on her waist, adjusting her saree. We both were over.

"*Ae Anamika! What are you doing here? Ae you boy leave her bastard! "*, he shouted at his best. His voice fissured with every next word he yelled. No one was around. He came towards us dropping the gifts in his hands. His voice cracked. His eyes widened and became red. We both were taken aback, literally petrified.

He grasped her hand and almost threw her away. I don't remember where she fell but I surely remembered the punch I acknowledged. His finger ring scratched my forehead. I still have scars on my forehead. He slapped me innumerable times and shouted "what the hell were you doing to my daughter boy!" adding some other abuses in Bengali. I tried to explain to him that it was nothing like that. But he stopped me every time saying, "nothing! It was nothing for you? I will kill you bastard, you will pay!"

He roared madly in a typical Bengali accent and slapped me again. He was a man in late fifties, and it was not good for his health for sure. I tried to stand up and explain the whole scenario but before I could have uttered anything, he too fell down. He placed his hand on his chest and cried. Shona shouted and came towards us. Her father surely had got another heart attack. The situation grew so edgy that we both were out of our wits. Her father lied down crying and howling. Everything happened so quick that I didn't even realize when the scenario went so grave.

She too started crying, all of a sudden his eyes closed reflexively. Now I too had tears of fear in my eyes. Anamika clutched my collar and pleaded for help. I was so confused that my adrenaline gland refused to prepare my body to handle things. My brain refused to work, it always does when I need it.

"Do something Aarav. Help my Dad!" Shona sobbed. She was so panic-stricken.

"Wait! Just calm down Shona. Please!" I exclaimed as I rubbed her shoulders to calm her down. Blood was gushing through my scratched forehead.

My left arm was also hurt badly. I still gathered some strength and lifted her father from his shoulders. I rested him on the back seat of the car, and closed the door in aghast. Shona too joined me in front. I had never thought she would ever accompany me on the front seat in such a situation.

My life was full of appalling amazements. I always was in a state of shock due to one or the other thing.

I started the car and reversed it from the parking gate, almost

skidded it on the first gear. I was an immature driver with no license and the car was also not mine.

I drifted the car as fast as possible, the start was bad. I crashed the car into a truck. I never had driven a car before on roads. Meanwhile, Shona cried, looking at the back seat. She rubbed her father's feet, while I tried to search a nearby hospital. I asked people passing by and turned the car accordingly.

Finally we reached the Max hospital, not so far from the City Park. The security guard showed me the way to park the car, but I ignored him completely. We had no time to even react properly, parking the car was an insignificant issue at that very moment. I somehow glided the car up onto the main gate level, it was not allowed though, guard kept on shouting.

I quickly got out and ran towards the emergency ward calling for a stretcher. The hospital authorities told me to wait till they arrange one. I ran back to the car and somehow dragged her dad into the hospital. No one stepped forward to help, all they did was make the place crowded enough to hinder our way. She too followed, and supported her dad from the other side. My senses stopped working. I rested him on the bed. Few doctors came running along and injected him with life redeeming drugs, clipping things all around him. They did what was required. They knew better than us. They asked us to wait outside for some time. Shona turned frenzied, crying and just crying!

The whole scenario boggled my already jammed mind.

I showed no reaction, only stood still, trying to realize what all had happened in the previous one hour.

Heartaches..

The numbness of my body passed away and I finally felt something. Terror, sorrow, panic and similar feelings and sensations took their toll on me. Meanwhile two nurses consoled Anamika.

All of a sudden a doctor came to me and asked, “Is he your father?”

“Yes, what happened?” I replied as Shona looked at me.

“Please go and fill up the form fast and deposit the money required”, the doctor said and left.

“Sir”, I said as I stopped him, “we reached here in an emergency…money…umm”,

“Look son, we won’t be able to give him the appropriate treatment until you deposit the money. I can’t help you with this, these are hospital rules”, he said and finally left.

I felt helpless. I looked at Shona. She still was unable to accept this sudden accident. She was crying endlessly. I held her hand. She calmed down a bit, but sobbing continued. Seeing her like that gave me immense pain.

I thought of my next step. I never wanted to ruin her brother’s marriage but sooner or later they would have searched for uncle and Shona. And this happened at the same time, Shona’s phone rang. It was her mother as I looked at her flashing screen. “What now?” Shona shrieked and her voice cracked and tears again brimmed up in her eyes.

I was so confused that I was not in a state to give any advice. I better thought of leaving the hospital. I left saying “I am going Shona, I will come back with money. Please take care of yourself, act wisely. Please handle all this for a while and I know you will”.

Now my first aim was to arrange 5000 bucks for the registration before the matter got more serious. I opened my wallet, it was almost empty as usual, and there were around 700 bucks in it, not enough. I looked around and finally at my wrist. My dad’s Swarovski watch. I

had almost stolen it from his cupboard to flaunt.

I left the hospital and ran through the lanes of Pitampura. I was breathing heavily. I asked people around if anyone over there would take my watch and lend me some appreciable amount.

Minutes passed as I finally found one shop, 'Khanna watches'. I went in as the shopkeeper was just about to shut down the shutter, it was 10:30pm. Luckily I came a few minutes before. Almost all shops were closed at this time. This was my first and last hope. Without wasting much time, I popped out my watch and showed it to him. Without even looking at it clearly he uttered "Swarovski metal, eh?"

"I want to sell it", I said hurriedly.

"What? Are you sick? Boy let me shut down the shutter. I don't have much money to buy such an expensive watch. This is a small repairing shop, please go and sell it somewhere else", he yelled.

"How much can you give me uncle?" I asked.

"See, you're going sick, do you have any idea that this watch is worth 77,000 INR?" Mom would surely kill me for this.

"Tell me how much can you give?" I asked again.

"Have you stolen it?" He looked at me in suspicion looking intently at my injured head. He must have thought that I had been caught stealing the watch and beaten up. I remained blank.

"Okay! I have ₹4500 right now with me, so are you sure you are selling it at that?" He asked still unable to believe that I wanted to sell it. It was the biggest deal of his life I guess, mine too!

"Sure!" I declared as I moved my hand forward.

"Is there any problem son?" he asked, wasting my time.

"Someone is fighting for his life and I am fighting for him. I need the money urgently", I said as he finally relaxed his expressions and gave me 4500 bucks.

It was enough now. I had ₹ 5200 with me. Should I consider this as a profit of ₹ 200 or a loss of ₹ 72500?

I sprinted in the dark lanes of Pitampura. I reached the hospital with ₹ 5200 in my hand, running out of breath. My chest was literally paining as I reached the emergency ward.

Dibakar, Anamika's brother in his marriage outfit and her mother with two more people stood there beside Shona including Kishnendu. They gave me a dreadful look as Dibakar came running towards me as he slapped me. I was helpless. The money slipped off my hands. A tear fell down my eye as I looked up at him.

"You asshole, what do you think of yourself? Eh? I will not spare you bastard. Police will be coming any moment. You're screwed boy! ", he said as he removed the groom's coronet.

Few men encircled me as they waited for the cops. I don't know what case they would file against me.

“Registration?” I gathered some strength and asked.

“Now just don’t try and escape from the situation. This will NOT help Mr. Aarav!” he said as he called someone.

We waited for seconds. He probably would have registered his father and the doctors were at work. I wondered why Aniket and Karan never called me. This was pretty amusing; even Karan’s car was with me.

Luckily I saw Karan and Aniket rushing in the corridor towards us. And then what I saw, took the remaining life out of me. I was dead now, completely!

My parents and Vaibhavi were approaching me. Now who the bloody hell informed them about all this?

These fifty minutes of my life were the edgiest moments till date. Shockwaves all around me!

“What is wrong with you? Look at him, he is bleeding”, my mom said as she touched my cheeks sympathetically, the best thing happening to me in last few minutes.

“Mom, I just came here … “, I tried to explain as Dibakar came over and bawled to my dad.

“Isn’t it enough for you people? My dad is fighting for his life and you people are having a good time over here? Look mister, your son is a bastard and let me tell you his deeds that should kill you here and now if you know a word called SELF-RESPECT”.

My dad was a generous and adoring man. He was mature enough to ignore what Dibakar did at that moment of time, because he knew even Dibakar was not in his senses. An ill father, an almost broken marriage and a troublesome sister! Phew!

“Calm your voice down, while talking to my dad”, I said and interrupted him. He grabbed my throat yet again. Aniket and Karan came to my rescue.

“What if I don’t?” he shouted at me and turned to my father, pointing at him, “Your child has been using my sister for satisfying his sick desires. He is the reason that my dad is here, almost dead.” He was struggling to get himself free from Aniket and Karan’s grip.

“This is a hospital! Move out and do whatever you have to” ,the doctor came running and shouted at us.

“I will see you all,”, he concluded and jerked out Karan’s hand.

“But dad, who informed you about all this?” I asked as Vaibhavi stared at her cell phone screen, probably texting the latest breaking to her boyfriend. Mom eyeballed my bare wrist, as I made all possible gestures to cover it.

“Look Aarav, it doesn’t matter at this point of time. You should be here, help them till his father gets well. Take my car!” Dad said as he handed over his car keys.

The support he gave was required indeed. I felt a little relieved.

"Yeah! Lend him your car, your money, everything so that he can go and fuck innocent girls out there! Asshole!" Dibakar screamed as my hands automatically grabbed his neck. I smashed his nose. It felt like my all frustrations went off with that punch!

His nose started bleeding as dad grabbed me. It began all again in the hospital corridor. Anamika and her mother came crying. They saw that I punched him but they didn't hear what provoked me to do that. My mother grasped my hand in anxiety as Vaibhavi too took some interest in the action going out in here, for a few nano-seconds though!

"You hit dada! Aarav!" Anamika said, her eyebrows making big hills and her mouth-widened with a short and sweet tongue inside, that I was conquering a couple of hours ago! The cause actually!

"He cannot yell what he wants to, especially to my dad", I said.

"Your dad! It's not your dad lying on a hospital bed and fighting for his life. It is all about my dad Aarav!" she cried. The topic suddenly went off its roots. Whose-daddy-is-stronger thing came in between.

"Shona, you are just .."

"Just leave for god's sake! We don't need your help anymore!" She said as another tear rolled down my eye. I atleast expected Her to consider my perspective, but she was too upset and panic stricken to understand me.

The scenario went more intense when police arrived!

"This guy officer!" Anamika's mother said, pointing at me.

"So you punched him? *Bohot garmi chadhi hai ke*?" the Jaatt cop said.

"Sir but he…" I tried to explain.

"Let's go to the police station and talk about this issue. Come along", cop said even without hearing the opposition. Unfair!

He noted down her mother's statements, while Shona cried even harder. Worst day of my life you can call it!

My dad tried to stop him but the cop demanded us to come with him. May be he wanted more than what my dad offered publicly or may be, he was serious about his duty, and will screw us all!

"Shona just try and understand …" I wanted to explain things to her but her mother clutched her away from me. The uncles gave me a will-not-spare-you-look! Dibakar sat on the bench, murmuring as a nurse treated his nose. Unfair again, I was also injured when I arrived. She didn't treat me.

We left, dad ordered mom and Vaibhavi to go home while both of us went along with the cop in his PCR. For the first time in his life ever, my dad got this unwanted opportunity to sit inside a criminal

van. I felt ashamed of myself. My dad, who really was a highly regarded person in his profession and personal life, had to live through these moments of shame because of his good-for-nothing son.

We finally reached the police station. A few officers were having their dinner, few having drinks and few preferred to sleep in their duty hours. I only expected the last scene though.

“Look officer, let us settle this out”, my dad said, before he imprisoned me. And that was it when it comes to Delhi Police, I was home in next few hours.

I couldn’t bear to stand anymore and blackness conquered my eyes. I fell down, a little pain in the back, and a numbness spread across my body.

I woke up in my bed, a little bandage on my head and a lot of pain in the chest. Mom sat beside me, she helped me to get up as if I had had a really bad accident. Getting up was painful though. She looked at me with moist eyes and finally said, “You have given us the newest experiences of our life. And we accepted and went through everything without a word. I don’t want any problem in our life because of those fish-eaters. You better get this thing in your mind”. She left me alone in the room, giving a final disgusted look.

I really felt uneasy now. Everything that had happened the day before rushed through my brain again at the same time. Contrasting things had happened in the whole day.

I sat in my room, alone, injured. I had no one to listen to me, to lend me a shoulder to cry on. I felt burdened. Guilt, shame, and the most dominant feeling-pain conquered me.

Pain of separation. Pain of having hurt a lot of people. Pain of messing up my love life, love and life.

Spaced out!

I saw no point in going to the school. I had no guts to face Shona, that is, if she came.

I quit the institute despite the extreme objection of my family members. They were still concerned about my studies. Actually, this was the only thing they were concerned about. I spent my days gazing somewhere in the air. Time could not heal my wounds, everything was fresh and throbbing. Every moment spent with her gave a momentary smile, the very next moment other things hovered my mind and pulled me back in hell. I couldn't help myself, no one could. Nothing could be mended now.

Karan and Sunaina occasionally came to visit if I was alive, they truly tried to soothe me.

Board exams were round the corner. They motivated me to forget things, cracked lame jokes to make me laugh but I couldn't, or maybe everything seemed lame to me without Shona by my side. They motivated me to study, to move on, but all in vain.

"Aarav, for how long do you think you'd rot in this room man?" Karan asked in an irritated voice when he didn't receive my response on something he had uttered to me.

"I am trying."

"I know how much you are trying. You seriously need to get up and live dude. You can't ruin your career, your family."

"Words would have been different if you were in this situation", I uttered rudely and turned my face.

"He is trying to help you Aarav, don't talk to him like that. Get up now and please try to study. We have our exam tomorrow", Sunaina said in the most polite tone.

Anamika's face flashed in front of me. My eyes spilled over again. Karan put his hand round my shoulder and hugged me.

"Calm down, we understand. We are here for you. We will be there, always", He said as he supported the dead me.

Karan dictated the theory from physics text book as I calmed down. He tried his best to force some academic text into my mind. I wanted to follow him, but my mind was not one of the kinds which could be easily tamed. I could hardly understand what he said. I was hearing, not listening. God knows how much I retained.

"Sunaina is on the phone, she wants to talk to you,", Mom handed me over the phone as I was about to surrender myself to my bed that night.

"Aarav, you need to know this. I am sorry I have been hiding all situations from you for long."

"What happened?" I panicked, suspecting it to be related to Anamika.

I was right. She began.

"Anamika's father got discharged from hospital a week ago. Anamika was brutally beaten up by her father for the reason you know better than me. There has been a lot of discussion in their family regarding her future. They feel their reputation in the city has been murdered by what their daughter has done and the way her brother's marriage broke. So…", she paused.

"So? Speak up?" I shouted, unable to bear the long pause.

"Anamika is leaving Delhi in a few hours, forever", Sunaina finally said and sighed.

"And you are telling me now? But where is she going? Chennai?" I shouted again.

"Even I didn't know of it Aarav, she called me from some STD right now. She didn't tell where she is, just called me to inform you, said that she'd call again and disconnected."

"Sunaina…", I said helplessly, tears started to caress my eyes again. Mom snatched the phone, doubting that it was Anamika on the line.

"Stay away from the life of my child", she shouted at Sunaina and banged the phone.

I got up, gaining no sense of my surroundings. I had not even started to recover from the tragic incidents of my life, and now, my life had put me into this.

She was going away, forever.

I cried my eyes out. I wanted to shout, but I couldn't. I wanted to see her once, just once before she left. I wasn't prepared to let her go like that. I couldn't do anything. I have never felt so helpless all my life.

I don't know when I slept, crying and longing for her. Next morning, mom pulled the covers off me.

"Get up and go to school, we have seen enough of it. Go and stop yourself from ruining your life", Mom shouted at me. She showed no

mercy that day.

I had no strength to argue.

I went to school with swollen eyes. Everyone stared at me. No doubt, people around me knew the scenario, with much more spice added to it. I preferred to ignore!

I entered the class after a long time. Sunaina and Karan came and hugged me. They were happily shocked to see me while Aniket was missing somewhere.

I tried to force a smile, but couldn't do it. I stood like a corpse in the prayer, no expression, no involvement, nothing. The prefect had been replaced by second prefect.

We walked back to our class. Two teachers stood in the corridor, discussing. Anamika's name attracted my attention.

"Yeah, she got her School leaving certificate in urgency. It must have been very critical", Mrs. Bahl said.

"Family situations can really drag hell out of your life. She was such a nice student, a scholar. I hope she gets all the success in her life", Replied Mrs. Gupta.

How can her parents play with her studies? They are making her skip secondary school examinations. The situation had really gone out of control. I was again and again encountered with her memories. During recess, I missed her peeping through the window. I missed her echoing laughter, her sweet smile, the way she blushed when she saw me looking at her. I was going insane with every passing minute.

Days passed like that. My family had started being strict. I rejoined the insti forcefully. I went there but had neither interest, nor concentration.

I somehow felt eligible for appearing in the exams. My pre boards score had been extremely humiliating. Mom and dad had started yelling at me now. I felt, their affection for me had become proportional to the time spent I spent on studies now and to my scores.

I survived one whole month deprived of happiness and privileged with devastating pain. Sunaina had received no news of Anamika. I had no choice but to trust her and accept that loneliness is now my companion.

Karan gave me Sunaina's examples of having survived a heartbreak so wisely. He accepted that it was much less intense and much milder, but she had actually come out of it beautifully. Aniket on the other hand had got along with Shanaya. I heard of him boozing almost every day. I paid no heed to it.

I no more cried for her, but yes I was restless in her thoughts, every passing moment to be frank. Board examinations somehow got over and everyone got busy with their JEE and PMT preparations.

I was left alone yet again.

Sunaina's father was getting a promotion and transfer from his office to Kolkata. Sunaina was soon expected to leave Delhi as well, but she promised to be in contact.

Vaibhavi tried to sympathize with me and ask me if I needed help in studies, her IITian boyfriend would have provided it. But I refused for it. It was more like a taunt than a help. I ensured her that I was preparing.

I had finally suppressed my depressing thoughts and put in great effort to study. I could atleast compensate a little bit for what my family had been through because of me.

IIT JEE was a few days away.

I was normal, but my father was extremely anxious, yet buoyant about the exam. I was looking forward to what next tragedy was coming along my way. Pessimist I had become.

Out of the blues - Kolkata

Sitting on the couch, another sunny morning, very humid, I had taken a break from my JEE preparations after studying seriously for about 300 seconds. I lied down and gazed at the fan, black, three blades, turning clockwise, interesting.

I heard the landline phone tring-ing. Mom would take care of it, I thought and continued gazing at the amazing fan. Now why does everyone bother me with such hard tasks? I got up when no one picked up the phone.

"Hello."

There was hell lot of disturbance in the line. I once thought of disconnecting.

"Hello,", a familiar female voice came.

"Hello,", I repeated and tried hard to recognize the voice.

"Aarav? Sunaina here! How have you been?" she cheerfully asked.

I was really glad to hear her voice. Her call brought a smile on my face.

"I am fine, what's up with you. How's Kolkata?"

"Yup, it is really nice to be here. Really sweet people over here. Guess what? I am trying to learn a little bit of Bengali from Ana…", she paused.

"From?" Bengali only made my wounds fresh. However sweet the language was, for me, it had painful associations.

"From Anahita, a friend over here. How are your preparations for IIT going on boy?" her tone suddenly went low.

"Oh, they are going good. I am trying", I responded in a low tone.

Rhyming names can really pose serious problems to one's heart, but of course, she must not have done it intentionally.

"Aarav, are you okay?" her tone became very polite and concerned.

"I am fine", I concluded it precisely, or you can say, I lied abruptly as I had been doing from past many months. I wanted to ask

her if she got any news of Anamika. I tried hard to suppress the urge but couldn't and finally questioned her.

"Did you hear from her?" my voice broke at the end.

A few moments of silence passed.

"You still love her? What can you do to meet her?"

"I don't think I would ever gather words to answer your question. I just want to see her. It's been so long. I just cannot tell how restless I feel these days", I said.

"Even she wants to meet you for one last time Aarav. Would you be able to do that?"

"What? What did you just say? She called you? Where is she? Is she fine? She said she wants to meet me? Tell me everything Sunaina, I beg", Tears paced up as the pain in my chest became alive again.

"Aarav, she and I are in the same city. She wants to meet you just once. She cannot talk to you with her family hovering around her all the time", Sunaina informed in a low tone.

"She is in Kolkata? Is she fine?"

"Yes, she is fine. She really wants to meet you. I told her it is not possible as you have your JEE this week. But…"

"When and where do I have to come to meet her?" I interrupted.

"You don't even care how far you'd have to travel? Your JEE? She confidently said you'd come, but I doubted. Do manage things wisely Aarav. I'll mail you the address of my residence, hold a sec."

I waited impatiently.

"Dad has come. I'll contact you later", And she hung up.

Last time? Why was she so much focusing on that phrase? But the good thing was, I was going to see her atleast, my heart got back its lub dub.

I checked and rechecked my mails every few minutes. I finally got Sunaina's address. She had mentioned one more thing- Karan will accompany you.

Karan hadn't filled for JEE, he knew his potentials. And AIEEE was far away.

I called Karan from my landline phone. We settled the tickets. A general bogey won't do any harm, we had to leave.

It had been ages since I met her. Her cheerful smile conquered my mind. Another restless night, but for different reasons. I had not told about it to anyone at home but I needed to say it to someone, but whom?

Vaibhavi would understand. I got up and went to Vaibhavi. I narrated the whole scenario to her. I had to deal with a lot of tantrums until she finally noticed tears in my eyes.

Tears-a way to melt a girl's heart. A girl's tears-a way to melt a man's heart. Powerful weapon it is, I concluded. But this time it was

for real!

Mom and dad were out for a reception party. They came late and passed into sound slumber.

I woke up at 4:00am. I thought of bidding goodbye to Vaibhavi. I softly knocked at her door, she was awake. She pulled my hand and placed her phone in my hand and 10,000 rupees, the amount she had saved to pay for her new phone. She had moist eyes. I somewhere felt guilty. “Please do take care of yourself, I’ll say you’re at Karan’s place for JEE preparations but do come as early as possible”. She said and pushed me out of her room.

I tip toed my way out of the house and called Karan. We reached New Delhi railway station at 5:30am. The train was scheduled for 7:30am.

Sunaina’s words about ‘the last time’ were pinching through my nerves. Final announcement was being made for the departure. Karan took my luggage and we boarded the train as he seated me on the window seat, may be to distract me, quite difficult though. If IIT-JEE exam cannot distract me then I can bet, anything won’t.

The train whistled and left for Kolkata. I observed the vast fields and Karan kept his eyes on me. He offered several things to eat, some songs to listen, some things to have a look at but alas, I ignored each and everything. Stations came and went, I never stepped down from the train for next sixteen hours. I survived on water for the whole journey.

Karan was the man who had patience enough to bear me. Any other person would have surely pushed me out of the moving train for the way I had been behaving.I was making things complex for him.

Finally we reached Kolkata, the city of joy people call it. I was going to be the new species here.

We debarked on the Howrah railway terminus. No one came to receive us, of course! Chaos all around, the station had a stench of fish which made me crinkle my nose as I wondered about eating the same in future.

Karan had the address and I had…umm…agitation.

We took a taxi from the station to the main city of Howrah. I looked around, it was not a rich city, yet joyful. Truly said, money can’t buy you happiness.

Situated on the banks of the Hooghly River, the pretty city of Kolkata boasts of a graceful culture. Sweet voices delimited us from all around, cute girls to fat aunties. Victoria Memorial to Howrah bridge everything indeed was beautiful. Behind the bejeweled doors of each house, incenses, hazes, and gleaming flowers walloped with the greenery to herald a flavor of festivities. The air was perfumed with the delicate smell of vermilion, camphor, the spiky odor of new-

fangled clothes and pungent whiff from the kitchen. Thrilled prattle of voices mixed with the timbre of rituals definitely offered a great sense of homely feeling.

In no time we reached the Howrah city.

Sunaina buzzed Karan to tell him that her parents had left for some work. So we could go to her place as well.

Great pump and show could be seen all around the city. "*Kothaye jabe apni?*" the driver uttered something in Bengali.

Perhaps he asked where exactly we wanted to go.

I had learnt a bit of Bengali via Anamika. Many a times, I had heard her talking to her family members in Bengali.

"*Dada, Sreenath colony jabo ami*", I replied as Karan looked at me in shock.

"What? I know Bengali!" I declared and looked outside as the driver pulled his yellow cab.

I observed mud statuettes of Maa Durga on the streets of Kolkata. The city mesmerized us by its narrow streets, tram journeys, and shrines.

Karan called Sunaina to inform her of our arrival.

I rolled my eyes as I saw Sunaina coming towards us, almost running. She hugged Karan and looked at me. "Where is Anamika?" I inquired without even asking about her well being. I was so confused that I sincerely did senseless things.

"Just look at yourself Aarav! You're not doing good to yourself or anyone! Dark circles, lean body! What are you up to? Huh!" Sunaina yelled as I still looked for her.

"Tell me where?"

"She is reaching in a few minutes. Come, let us go to my house."

"Is it safe? I mean guys at your place when parents are not at home?" Karan asked.

"This is not Delhi Karan", Sunaina uttered a precise and self explanatory statement.

"Definitely safer than an open car parking", Karan added, shrugged and giggled within.

"Not a joke Karan!" I shrieked.

Sunaina seated us in the living area and went to get something from the kitchen and came back, balancing two trays.

"Have it", She ordered me. I picked up the glass to avoid any argument with her.

A little choking went in me.

The doorbell rang, bringing my heart to a stop.

I got up before Sunaina and ran towards the door. I struggled with the lock as Sunaina easily pulled the latch and opened the door, suppressing my struggle.

Anamika stood at the door. White kurta, hair tied up. She had become skinny, but looked beautiful as ever. Her brown eyes, already moist, brimmed up as she looked into my eyes.

Tears flowed down our eyes as we surrendered ourselves to the moment. I stepped forward and took her in my arms. We hugged each other so tightly.

"Aarav!" she said, in her sweet voice. It felt amazing hearing my name in her voice after months.

"How have you been Sho…"Sunaina stopped me as I had not even started out firing questions at her.

Sunaina guided us to her balcony and went back to the living area to talk to Karan.

"Shona, why? Why didn't you inform me before leaving? I know I have…"

She ignored my blabbering and said, ", Aarav! I love you".

I fought the constant lumps in my throat, all in vain. I couldn't utter a word as she looked at me with loving eyes. There was a long pause. We stood, looking at each other, locking each other's glimpse in our eyes. We stood like that for minutes. I was finally hearing the words from her. I wanted to steal her away from there. She broke the silence and the flow of my thoughts.

She disconnected from my gaze.

"Sunaina must have told you that I'm going to meet you for the last time today.. ", I interrupted her.

"Last time? THIS has been taking life out of me", I wanted to say much more than my words allowed me to say.

"Aarav, nothing can be done now".

"What do you mean nothing can be done?"

"I'm helpless, Aarav. Dad has already fixed my marriage with Kishnendu, this week on 9th of April. I'm helpless", she sobbed.

I stood numb. Her words killed me inside. I stood in silence, dead.

"Things have changed and you know why that was. Nothing can be done now", she replied.

"Why now? You love me. I love you, what is the problem? We can talk to uncle about this. I can't live without you Shona and… Kishnendu? What the hell?" I muttered.

"I wanted to have an eyeful of you for the last time. I'm really very sorry, I don't have much time to interact. I just called you here to confess today that yes, I love you more than anything in this world, *aami tumaake chhere thaakte parbo naa Aarov, shottii*", She uttered in

emotions.

‘What?’ I wondered what did she just said.

My tears refused to slow down, the cool breeze made the setting anxious. Something like a dream. She left within seconds as I stood there in disbelief.

I had come with a dream, of seeing her peacefully, hoping to turn things the right way. But life had planned something else on my part. Nothing was left inside, nothing to come out, nothing to say, nothing to feel. It was like my soul had parted away, forever!

The last promise ~

"When are you coming back?" Vaibhavi's call shook me. "I don't know, it will take time, please manage things at home. Please!" I said as I pressed the disconnect button.

"Papa and Ma will be here in the next one hour. You need to leave, I am so sorry". Sunaina said with a guilty look on her face.

"Please tell us where can we spend some time? Some cheap motel or something, I am not carrying much cash?" Karan looked at me and then at Sunaina.

"You take a taxi from here to Bow Bazar, there is a little rest house there. Spend some time there and inform me about your departure."

Karan pulled me by my arm.

"Please take care of him", Sunaina said as she bade us farewell at the taxi stand.

We struggled a lot, I mean, Karan struggled a lot but finally found a lodge. It was like a small temple, basically a pocket friendly place for travelers to hide their heads at night.

Karan came back with two tattered blankets in the room.

"You need tea?" he asked as he picked up our luggage. I terminated my sobbing and helped him with the luggage.

"Your phone is ringing dude, attend the call." Karan took the phone from me and answered.

"Yes didi".

Karan turned to me and asked, "Does she know the truth?" I nodded.

Karan narrated the story to her precisely.

"I will discuss it with him and let you know. Okay, hmm… alright, Bye di."

"So, what's the scene now? What do you want?" he asked straight to me.

"I am not going anywhere until she is married", I said in a

determined voice.

“But it isn’t so easy Aarav, I mean how can ..?”

“Sorry to say this Karan, but you can leave anytime!” I said being so harsh to this guy constantly.

“Okay. Okay. But you have to get back before your JEE anyhow”, He said as he shook hands of promise with me.

“We will, this time I need to make some confessions and want to see her happy! That’s it!”

He dialled a number from his phone.

“Dad, yeah, I am fine. Can you please do me a favor? Aarav’s dad might call you today, tell him Aarav is at our place for a few days for JEE preparation. Please, I will tell you everything once I come back.”

He turned back to me. “Everything is settled at your place. We need some cash, I am coming back in a few minutes from ATM.”

“I have around 9,000 bucks. Wait”, I handed him over the crushed notes I had kept in my bag.”

I sat down in the huge hall among a few travelers. I was indeed going from the hardest part of my life. I never expected so many tragedies at this age. But love makes you vulnerable if you ask me.

Karan brought some North Indian food from somewhere.

“Now have something for my sake brother. I swear I won’t swallow a single bite until you eat this.”

I sat dumb, looking at him.

“You must not take all this pain for me. I know what I’m doing is going to lead me nowhere, going to get me nothing. Something is blocking my way. I can give IIT the next year but then I will never get a chance to bring Shona back. I don’t know if this is love or madness, I don’t know what you will call it. Whatever it is, it is barring me. I just cannot leave without her Karan, I can’t”. I sobbed as Karan suddenly hugged me all the way.

“Aarav, I can’t see you like this. At least tell me what are you going to do?” he asked.

“I myself don’t know. I just don’t know”, I cried my eyes out. We knew that the time was not good.

He smiled and kissed me this time, as I pushed him back and we finally shared a giggle after a long time.

9th April, 5:00a.m. I sat next to our luggage, observing the morning mutterings. It was her marriage day and I was still sitting idle. Karan and tears were my true companions these days. My heart was howling. Emptiness was all around, blowing winds, muttering birds, the memories we made together, her first glimpse, the trip, the first date everything. Not the first kiss!

I still had things to say, things which I never said to her but I wanted to. I was always unable to utter my feelings to her but that

day I felt like yelling everything out.

“We will meet Sunaina at 5:30, evening. You will be able to meet Anamika at around 6:00 PM, when she will be in her bridal room, alone. Sunaina suggested we should leave Kolkata today. She said sorry about this but you already have ruined her brother’s marriage and if it also happened today then her dad would surely not be able to surpass another heart attack. So tell me what your verdict is?” Karan said it all in one go.

“I think she is right, I should better leave. I would, trust me. But just one time, I just want to meet her for the last time”, I said with a heavy heart. It was a nightmare, a never ending nightmare. I tried to tell the same my heart, but I was made to realize that it was not.

I don’t know when I fell asleep over there only. I lied down like a drug addict, as Karan explained.

“Taxi”, he shouted, standing almost in the middle of the road, near Howrah Bridge.

The blue skyline was turning deep orange. The Hooghly River looked beautiful as ever.

“Shibpur, community farms”, he said to the yellow cab driver.

The evening soon changed into darkness. The sun was no more visible. The city roared at its usual pace, but my world was going through a pause. We passed by various famous historical sites in Kolkata, and uncountable ghats beside the Hooghly river.

I saw a dozen farms in queue, only few had been enlightened and the others were like me, dimmed in the darkness of clouds.

“Here we’re? Which farm?” he asked.

“I don’t know!” I replied.

“Groom or bride’s name then?” he questioned.

I had a lump in my throat. I again fought tears and replied back “Anamika weds…”

“Kishnendu,”, Karan completed.

“Okay!” he said and turned the taxi towards a small booth, “Anamika weds Kishnendu”, he told to one of the guy. I whimpered.

“Farm number 18”, the guy at the booth replied.

I saw a big lawn, acres big, sheltered by a huge amount of lightning. A low music could be heard. A big hoarding displayed something I never ever wanted to see and that too in a heart shaped flower box, “Kishnendu Weds Anamika.”

We walked about 200 meters and reached the car parking, another arena which reminded me of some sweet and spicy moments. I saw a girl coming towards me, holding her purple saree plates. It was Sunaina.

“Aarav!” she exclaimed as she hugged me tight in reflex. My bags automatically fell down, as tears did from her eyes.

“How’s she?” I asked.

“Do you think she’ll be fine without you? She is dying each day, she cries every night. She has fallen for you. She is doing the same what you are doing to yourself Aarav!” Sunaina cried harder.

“Where is she?” I had no more words to add on.

“Come”, she said as Karan took my bags. We walked through bushes and reached at the back side of the community farm. A small bridal room was situated behind the main farm, from where they would take Shona for marriage ceremonies.

“Wait here!” Sunaina whispered as she let me stand behind a few bushes. She went inside to check.

“Clear! Come in”,

I went inside, there was a door. My heart was beating fast, sweat all around my body and a heavy shiver.

Anamika sat near a huge dressing table, perfectly draped in red saaree with traditional golden borders. She turned and stood up, looking at me, yet not smiling. I forgot for what I went there. I was so lost in her beauty.

She came closer, her hands stained in *alta*, a big red *bindi* along with tiny white *bindis* which decorated her forehead and her chin in a pattern. She wore a lot of floral ornaments all over her neck and hands, intensifying her prettiness, a *topor* on her head according to Bengali customs. A shiny golden nose ring via her little nose to ears complimented her magnificence. Her eyes glittered as always, this time looking more highlighted with moisture in them. She walked towards me.

A tear tumbled through her eye, taking along a few bits of *kohl*.

“Aarav!” she purred. Finally she smiled and hugged me as tight as she never did before. I was in a standstill position, yet unable to get out of her mystic and react.

We both broke into tears.

We started taking heavy breaths, while quivers ran through my nerves.

I held her cheeks and wiped her tears off with my thumbs, and kissed her forehead trying not to wreck her make-up.

“Shona? Are you happy?” I asked and snuffled, though I knew the answer.

She looked at me, accusing me of daring to utter such words. I kept holding her cheeks with my palms. Her hands were now on my chest. She banged her fist every next second on my chest and then buried her face in it. Her bangles made cheeping sound.

“I am so sorry about everything Aarav!” she said.

“Please, this all has happened just because of me, I did everything. I ruined your brother’s marriage, your father’s health,

everything. I am the only cause Shona! I am sorry!" I cried.

"I don't know how I am going to do this. I am not ready for this at all!" she declared and cried her eyes out.

"See Shona, Sunaina suggested that I must leave Kolkata now and let you live happily. So, promise me that what you will do now, you'll be happy with that! Whatever you do, wherever you go, you'll do that with a smile, promise me", I said as lightly lifted her chin with my finger.

"Promise?"

"Live happily without you?" she fired back.

"Yes without me, for me!" I said.

"Hmmm!" she said clutching her lips together. I thought she would fight with me for this, but she too seemed numb and disheartened. I could see her lying to me all the way. I was helpless to do anything, but to leave as soon as possible.

Sunaina came in, without knocking.

"Aarav, you both don't have much time. I just called Dibakar dada, they are a few kilometers away from the farm", she informed.

"Hmm", I said as I turned up to Shona again.

"Shona, in life, we all have an unspeakable secret, an irreversible regret, an unkept promise, an unheard request, an irreplaceable loss, an unreachable dream and an unforgettable first love…still life is all about being happy. Life doesn't stop Shona, Life Goes On." I said as I tried to relieve her, adding a fake smile.

"I have heard these lines before somewhere else Aarav!"

"Actually, Diego Marchi said that!" I said as we both chuckled finally striking our foreheads, with teary eyes.

"Such a crook you're! You can steal anything" she said.

"I'm not, I can't steal you!" I made a puppy face.

"I'm already yours stupid".

I laughed within at preaching something I myself could not follow. I sniffed and fought bumps in my guts uncountable times to control myself from crying. I paused and started again.

"Okay now listen to me carefully, lame jokes apart! There are lots of beautiful things around us. It's just a matter of how we see it and whether we're able to realize it. In life, of course there are always some ups and downs. However, I believe, that even in the most difficult situation, there's always a beautiful thing.. As wise people say-Everything happens for a reason. Life is indeed beautiful Shona. Promise me that you will always live with contentment and will maintain your beautiful smile, always!" I bellowed all random lines my mind could put into words.

"I know, how hard it is for you to bear all this, but, I have accepted the truth and I think you too should do the same", I lied

perfectly.

“Have you?” she questioned sweetly and made it more difficult for me.

“Yes I did”, I lied again to make her believe.

“Okay! Aarav but let me tell you that it’s hard to believe the truth. For me it is yet unbelievable, I’m happy that you want to move on in life, and you should! I promise I will be happy in whatever I do and wherever I go but do you promise me the same thing?”

She looked searchingly into my eyes. I was mute.

She slipped a paper into my pocket.

“You’ll open this after you board the train. Don’t worry, this isn’t a love letter”, she said, looking away, purposely fighting her tears.

A tear finally trickled down her cheek.

“I will”. I said in a promising tone, “I will Shona!”

Heavens Cried

I kissed her forehead again and left after a wringing eye contact. She knew I didn't want to leave and I knew she didn't want to let me go. I was choked inside, ready to burst out. Life had put me to something that I was not ready to accept.

Karan held me at the doorstep. We sat down on a wooden bench near Hooghly river at Santragachi Jheel, a few kilometers away.

I cried hard, covering my eyes with my palms. Suicidal thoughts came into my mind but simultaneously, crying faces of dad, mom, Vaibhavi and Shona too scurried in my head.

"When is your train?" a low voice inquired. I ignored.

She shook my shoulders, I came back to this unsolicited time.

"Huh?" I said in aloofness and turned back, it was Sunaina.

"Your train Aarav?" she asked again.

"7:30pm", Karan informed her.

"It's already 7:00" I think you should better leave, it'll take you half an hour to reach the terminus", she opined.

I picked up my bags as Karan called for a taxi.

"Howrah terminus", Karan instructed to the driver as he lodged our bags on his roof.

I waved my hand to Sunaina and gulped the spittle. The taxi paced up as I observed innumerable ghats passing by. Each and every moment I had spent with her was coming back to me. Karan sat still, not knowing what to do.

Karan got out and opened the door for me as we reached Howrah Terminus. I went outside, as he freed our luggage and paid the fare.

I was not in senses, my head ached like never before. I sat on the bench, train was yet to leave. Karan brought tea for us. I sipped it slowly to cure that twinge in my head. It was cold outside at night.

The train whistled. I kicked my tea glass off and stood up in aversion. I and Karan went towards the coach and checked registrations.

I grabbed my seat alongside Karan. A lot of mutterings on the station tried to distract me away from Shona's thoughts.

The train whistled again, this time for departure. Once I thought of getting out of the train and going back to Shona, but dropped each and every idea just for her serenity's sake.

The train took the pace as I leaned my head on a hard-grilled rusted window. The smell of air soon started fading.

My thoughts suddenly reminded me of Anamika's letter.I hurriedly took out that page which she had slipped into my pocket and started reading it.

Aarav,

Maybe what I am doing today reflects lack of courage in me, but I cannot live with the truth as it has approached me.

Maybe when you read this letter, I would have reached where you say I descended from-heavens.

I love you Aarav, and I am glad I am loving you till my last breath.

Take care

Keep your promise Aarav

I am keeping mine, I am happy now, trust me, I am happy like never before.

Move on in life… we have had lovely moments together… the time we spent together was heavenly, I am sorry for all that I have put you through. I love you Aarav

Do try to forget me and the memories we made together.

Anamika

My brain stopped working and I started crying loudly. Karan woke up, alarmed. I shouted, breathed heavily and grew mad over the contents of that letter. I didn't believe it for a while. I banged my head on the corroded window.

I called Sunaina impulsively. Her bell rang but no one picked up the phone. I tried again and again. My heart beat accelerated, my mind filled with the worst thoughts, and worst fears.

"We need to board down!" I declared as Karan stared at me.

"What?" Dude, you have your IIT exam tomorrow. Your father will be at our place in next few hours to pick you up.

"I need to go back ..I .", I sobbed.

Karan took the letter from my hand and went through its lines, hurriedly.

"Please don't cry Aarav, she'll be okay. I'll inform dad about this. You just calm down. We are going back, okay?" Karan hugged me as I cried again.

“Nothing has happened to her. I know this is just her prank. Funny she is, you know”, I said as I wiped my tears and laughed. “I just want to scold her for this.”

Karan pulled the chain and the train came to a halt.

We stepped down from the train. Chaos occurred amongst passengers in midway of Durgapur city. There was nothing around but a small forest through which the city was easily visible. I sprinted towards the city lights as Karan followed, dragging the luggage.

We almost ran three kilometers back with tears in my eyes to reach the main city of Durgapur. I could not see anyone else around but only a few taxis, chaiwalas and drunk truck drivers. I breathed heavily as I knocked the window of a ‘24x7 Taxi Stand’ office, near the Durgapur railway station.

“Do you know the time? It’s 11pm!” A guy said with a yawn, waking up while removing his warm blanket.

“Its urgent uncle, I need a taxi”, I was about to cry again. I kept quiet, explaining to myself that nothing has happened to Shona and she did it so that I’d come back. Random thoughts were rushing through my mind. I made Karan helpless. My demands and expectations from him were going inhuman with every passing event.

Karan tried to convince the guy.

“What happened boy? Anything serious?” the guy asked, concerned this time.

“Please take us to Shibpur trunk road, Kolkata?” I said.

“What???” he almost came out of the window.

“Please uncle, we are in a trouble! It is serious”, Karan pleaded for his help.

“Okay! But it’ll take around four to reach Shibpur and around 5000 bucks, is it so serious now?”

Karan set the deal. The uncle came out of his small office and lodged our luggage on the roof of taxi.

I hugged Karan and cried out loud throughout the journey, moaning her name. The driver just flew his ambassador at high speed.

It was almost sunrise in Kolkata. The skyline was slowly turning deep orange. I hoped for a dawn in my life too but it seemed my life had reached its end.

We reached Shibpur farmhouse, the same place where Shona was getting married.

I went inside the house. A cool breeze welcomed me with a few rays of morning sun. It was still a bit dark.

The farmhouse had nothing. Laborers were pushing the chairs and tent-house inside the trucks.

“Is the marriage over?” I asked a guy cleaning the carpets.

“No marriage took place, baba!” he said as my heart beats

multiplied.

"Why?" I shouted at him.

"How would I know, we people just came now. But I have heard that the bride fainted and they took her to the City Hospital", he yelled as I broke in tears again. This forced me to believe on that letter. I walked back with paralyzed legs. Karan hired another taxi and we headed towards the City Hospital. I tried Sunaina's number for the thousandth time now from Durgapur to here, but no one answered back.

As usual, the hospital scenario upset me. I rushed to the emergency wards and inquired there for Shona.

"Yes. A patient named Anamika Roy came here hours ago", a nurse informed me, checking out her records.

"She was in a state of decreased consciousness when she was admitted, and, umm… in the end it says she was reported dead!" she smeared.

Something stuck hard in my heart and then, numbness. Tears came out. I fell down on the floor rolling my legs and crying harder than ever. I struggled to breathe. I couldn't feel anything.

Darkness replaced everything. I remember seeing Karan a few feet away, rushing to hold me. My eyes shut and every moment we spent together flashed in my closed wet eyes. I saw her laughing, crying and hugging me.

Karan was talking to someone on the phone as I opened my eyes.

"I wanna see her,", I demanded.

Karan remained quiet and called a taxi.

"I am not going back until I see her. You may go back", I said and pressed near my chest to suppress the pain that throbbed in my chest.

"Manohar das road, "Karan said as we took the taxi.

"We are going at her place. Aarav, she is no more", Karan declared. I froze, but my tears didn't. It started raining slowly, some tiny drops made the windshield go misty.

Karan pulled me out. I was a corpse as we reached her residence. A few uncles stood outside the house with umbrellas in their hands and consoling each other. I saw some registered faces. I was all wet, just like the day when she left me after her first ever touch! Karan took me inside her house clutching my elbow. I gathered strength to look for her. I went further in as I saw Shona lying on the floor in her bridal attire, same maquillage, covered with a white cloth on her half body and few florets sprinkled on her shoulders. She was encircled by a few ladies including her mom and Sunaina who cried like hell. I was quiet now.

A lot of bawling could be heard from women encircling my Shona. I went near her and no one stopped me. Nightmare.

Nightmare. I murmured to myself.

I went further in a state that I could not even see anything properly. My head rolled as I fell down again, no pain again. I gathered the courage to raise my hand to touch her. A spark went through my body. It hurt my chest. The thumping in my chest paused. I looked at her lying down, with two cotton balls in her nose. I fought constant lumps and tried to breathe as I felt completely choked all inside.

Her maquillage was distorted. I fixed her make-up. I rectified the altered dots on her forehead with my index finger. Her body was cold and pale. Her eyes were closed, girdled with darkness. I shoveled my hand on her cheeks, I thought she would wake up the next second and will yell her sweetness on me as she always did. I was removing the cotton embosses from her nose and the flowers from her neck, as her mother pushed me away in reflex.

“Are you sick? Why have you come here? What do you want now!!” Her mother screamed, her voice cracked in midway.
“I .. I … I ..sshhoo …”, I breathed heavily.

Sunaina came and tried to pull me. I buried my face on Shona’s dead shoulders and shook them hard. I still believed that she would wake up. She didn’t.

“Aarav!” Her dad bellowed showing me his hand to hit me.

“Hit me! You want to hit me? You want to kill me as well? Do it! do it now!” I shouted as I stood up.

“It was YOU who provoked Shona to death”, I shouted.

“Please Aarav don’t create a scene on her funeral atleast, let her leave in peace”, Sunaina cried clutching my collars.

I saw Shona’s father reciting something to his relatives that she died because of renal congestion and she was suffering from asthma. It was all a lie, they knew that. It dint happen, the thing was that they never wanted the society to yell on them for the true reason.

Society-the reason why I and Anamika couldn’t be together, the reason they left Delhi, the reason of the extreme pain she went through, the witness of her death, and the blind and deaf supporter of lie about Shona’s death. Idea of her early marriage, skipping studies and coming to Kolkata was the reason of her downheartedness and the sole reason why she chose to commit suicide. Unfortunately, I had to keep quiet on this. We did not want another corpse here, a heart patient.

I felt a burden on my chest. I fainted and fell down next to her body.

“They took her to the cremation place near Padara ferry ghat, situated alongside the Hooghly river”, I heard someone say.

I got up and ran towards the main door. Karan stood there,

waiting for me.

I looked at Karan with hopeful eyes.

He took me to the Padara ferry ghat in a taxi. We went inside an open structure, the board said “Antimyatra maidan, Padaraghat”

Lord shiva’s big statuette welcomed the corpses there on a long human marble salver, where the dead body is rested for rituals for a few minutes.

There was nobody out there but a few sweepers. We went further as I saw a shed enclosed by a few men, including Dibakar and Shona’s dad. It was raining hard.

Before they took her body to the cremation ground, the foot impression of Shona were taken with red ink on a piece of paper. Her body was then carried to the cremation ground for the funeral. They kept it on a pyre. Dibakar circled the pyre seven times after the priest. Then he lit up the pyre to the chant of mantras.

As I headed towards them, Karan grasped my hand and said “don’t go there! Please! Please! It will create a scene. Don’t spoil her cremation, let her leave peacefully”, Karan begged.

I witnessed her cremation silently. Her face was still visible, lying on the log of woods. Tears rolled down my cheeks boundlessly as Dibakar performed all the rituals. I could feel the pain of her body being set alight. I thought she would cry out any moment with pain, she was sensitive. I was crying deeply from past many hours, with a few illusionist disruptions.

Sometimes you feel god is unfair, though it is fair that he is unfair with everyone.

Everyone left. I sat their till the evening, looking at her burning pyre and sobbing. The sound of fire and tapping of the rain made me weepy, more than before. Again and again this happened to me, every remembrance, every flash, each and every smile we shared together rushed back at me. Her twinkling eyes, her flown hair in breeze, her saccharine voice, her small nose, sparkling skin and the sweetness she spread all over, was no more. I wished to see her smiling again, laughing at my lame jokes and clutching my fingers whenever I got upset. Her love, her care, her fragrance.

Hours passed, I lost consciousness again.

A few people took me away. I was not in my senses to stop them. I was unable to see Karan!

It was a railway platform. This swayed me for a couple of seconds. I could hear the voice of an engine which grew louder as the time passed by. Most probably it was of the train coming on that platform. It felt like I was in air!

In a few seconds I was crushed by the train.

I Woke up as I shouted “Shona!!”

I observed the pace of trees outside the window. It was far less than my heartbeats, I didn’t realize when I fell asleep leaning my head on that window, my eyes were all teary, my whole body was covered with sweat, I was breathing heavily. Was it a nightmare? Worst nightmare of my life, I could not imagine that I saw something as terrorizing as that. Durgapur railway station announcement calmed me down. Means I slept for around two hours. I looked around with a spur on my mouth, only a few people boarded down. Karan was fast asleep. A few *chaiwalas* shouted on the platform. I hastily rifled my pocket to find that letter which Shona had given to me.

I sighed and started reading it, her hand-writing as beautiful as pearls…

Aarav,

I have neither words, nor time to tell you all that I wanted to.

I wished things went the right way, but destiny had other plans for you and me.

But here I am, making some serious confessions of my life.

2nd July, I saw you for the first time. You sweetly looked at me from the corner of your eyes. Decent, my heart said. I told Prateek, if you know the second prefect of our class, to go and check the other row for defaulters. I wanted to come close and talk to you. Sunaina noticed and teased me saying I have a ‘crush’ on you, but the truth was much bigger. I cannot explain in words the way it felt when you opened my umbrella seeing me struggle with it. The rain, it was a good omen, I perceived.

I liked your shy nature. I found it lovable. But I decided not to show that I am dying to talk to you.

I had heard somewhere-don’t pay much heed to boys, they’ll go mad about you and come after you. But greatest of theories fail on you, my love. You avoided me as well. I took it as rejection. But it felt good seeing you not talking to any girl.

Trip, huh! You were just too dumb to ask me to sit with you Thanks to the porn guy, the little kid, he made us sit together. Little angel, wasn’t he? Ma called me to tell that Kishnendu was in town for a few months, they would fix our marriage if he talks about it. I couldn’t handle it. Sunaina was busy with Aniket, and Shanaya, I feared she’d make fun of it. I cried alone, but not for long. You finally decided to talk. Tears, struggle, problems attract you a bit too much.

hehe

I thought of proposing you, because I knew you’d never ever have the courage for it, my shy love. I took you out for a walk with the same intention. The issue of my marriage stopped me. I was happy to have you as a friend at least. I didn’t want you to expect much from me, I have also

learnt the same from my life. Expectation is the mother of sorrow. I have grown up with crushed expectations and wishes, now I have accepted it as a part of my life.

Coming back to my confessions, I was going so crazy for you, my heart refused to slow down when you were around, and my brain was occupied with one name-Aarav.

Cute little moments spent with you made me smile whenever I was in agony.

I was falling for you every passing minute.

We couldn't talk in school. I joined your insti, risking your academics.

OH! One thing just strokes me! You know what, you are really bad at telling lies…I knew it in the first instant that you don't have a phone.

Anyways, I could see it in your eyes that you were going head over heels for me at the trip, and your proposal after boozing, it was hilarious, but really special. You became unconscious; I wish you had said some more words from your heart. Coming back to the phone, when I myself asked for your number, you started making lame excuses, looking elsewhere. Liar! Huh! But I never wanted to embarrass you or make you feel guilty. You arranged for some phone and contacted me, Aniket had told me by mistake that it was your mum's number and I was like-awww, you stole the cell just to talk to me, I found it really cute. I love you so much.

Teachers' day was meant to be special, everything was fine till the evening of 4th September, until dada revealed his relationship and dad got disturbed. A fear grew in my heart, a fear of losing my dad. I somehow came for the Teachers day celebration, making the excuse at home that it cannot be avoided as I was the coordinator.

Kishnendu had to visit us in the evening. He ruined my moments with you.

Things never took the right track since then.

Dada had to forcefully marry someone else. I was dying every day to talk to you, I was helpless. You understood my silence, no one else did. Your voice cured all sorrow and fear in me. But we couldn't talk. I cried whenever I was alone.

Dad's heart attack on dada's marriage took life out of me. I died numerous times of guilt. I loved you and I loved my dad. You can't imagine how difficult it was for me to tell you to leave me alone at the hospital, my words said something that was completely in contrast to what my heart demanded. I wanted you, I needed you Aarav.

Situations went out of control when dada's marriage broke. Dad became really violent, his condition was still not perfectly fine and stress wasn't good for him. Dada slapped me for what I had done. He told me that it was my duty to set my family as my first priority, just like he had done. Some family friend joked about dada's broken marriage. Dad had to face sarcastic comments from many of his colleagues. He got agitated and

finally decided to move out of the city.

I protested, my studies were at stake. I wanted to be someone; I wanted to study, a lot. I couldn't imagine myself ruining my life by marrying at this age.

But no one listened to me, no one heard me cry.

Dada repetitively reminded me of my duties and responsibilities. He understood my interest in academics, but I had to suppress it.

We moved out of the city, I couldn't contact you. It pinched me, I was not prepared to go without bidding you goodbye, but I had to.

Situations worsened as we came here. Dad's condition was not very good. Kishnendu's dad forced on getting us married and reminded my dad of his numerous favors in the past. Dad had to agree.

I was glad to find Sunaina near me. I asked her to somehow arrange a meeting for us. I knew you won't refuse, you'd come. When I saw you here, my firm decision of marrying Kishnendu faced a sharp blow. All my shattered dreams, my love, an early marriage, conquered my senses and I felt miserable.

And today, I am getting married to Kishnendu. I thought about it a lot. I don't think I can do this but at the same time I can't risk my papa's life by refusing for the marriage either. I can't run away with you, it is far too away from practicality. And I am not a coward that I'd quit living. But, I can't love anyone the way I love you.

I love you Aarav.

Move on in life… we have had lovely moments together… the time we spent together was heavenly, I am sorry for all that I have put you through.

Do try to forget me and move on in life.

Your Shona.

A tear scrolled down with every next word of that letter. I thanked God that it was just a nightmare and Shona's was alright, it was merely a dream. I cried very hard, rubbing my eyes and slept again in unconsciousness.

And I moved on..

I don't exactly know what time we reached Delhi. We reached ISBT from New Delhi Railway station with my deprived luggage.

My eyes were all teary and fear in my heart with a hell lot of pain hemmed in. I had my JEE in few hours. We took an auto from ISBT, Delhi. Being back in Delhi felt like being back to home. A tiny droplet fell down my eyelash as I passed Delhi haat. I saw myself and Shona still standing there and laughing mad, the gol gappe stall. I sniffed loudly as the driver gave me a glance.

Somewhere inside my brain, I knew I had lost her but deep inside my heart all the facts were in shreds. I was in a state of muddle. I knew what the truth was, but I was unable to accept it. I reached home. Karan's dad was seated in our sofa.

"Aarav!" my mom screamed and slapped me in love.

"Maa", I said as I hugged my mom and cried loudly.

Dad gave me an I-disown-you look as he knew that even if I gave JEE today, I won't be through it. Vaibhavi looked at me in disgust. Because of me, mom dad would have lost trust in her. I went inside my room and lied down. My head ached so badly.

Mom came and offered me food. If the whole world were put into one scale, and my mother in the other, the whole world would kick the beam. The heart of a mother is a deep abyss at the bottom of which you will always find forgiveness and infinite love.

Finally I skipped JEE that day, or you can say I dumped everything on my own!

Dad and Vaibhavi dint talk to me for days and never mentioned missing IIT. I was not getting over with my loss. Weeks passed with the same attitude of mine. I kept quiet and that's it. I looked myself in the mirror after a long time, my eyes were all red and swelled up. Unkept hair and a grown beard!

I woke up late night and gazed at the fan, I left food in between,

jogged for hours early morning. Karan tried to contact but I ignored everyone.

I finally got a phone, isn't life funny? When you have the access, you don't have the person. But still I called her number and left messages on her phone. Out of service they said.

"Where are you Shona? When can we meet up next? Why don't you pick up your phone? I miss you so much!" but no one ever replied. I still stole my mom's mobile phone to check whether she has messaged me there by mistake or not. I checked call logs to see if she ever called, but I found nothing, just a tear every time in my eye for her. I gazed at her old messages in the screened inbox of Vaibhavi's phone for hours. I read them again and again, word by word!

I went straight to Shona's house in Pitampura one day.

I banged her apartment's door. Nobody opened it, but I managed to knock it up for half an hour, crying out Shona's name. I went to Delhi haat and sat in the front of the ticket counter waitng for her, I sat there till evening with a hope. I even tried to commit suicide again.

I called Sunaina a several times but failed to get in touch. It pinched me badly!

I was at Rithala, an under construction mall, putting my probability calculation skills to use. I tried to figure out the place which would provide the least possibility of surviving after a jump. I was at the top storey, looking down, wondering why I still existed. And I climbed the edge to jump. A hand pulled me.

"Are you sick? What the fuck were you trying, huh?" It was Aniket, loud enough to capture the gaze of workers around.

"Aniket?" I said in delusion.

"Aarav! What has become out of you? What are you doing here?" He said as he sniffed and dropped his cigarette.

"Come, come with me .. ", Aniket said. He was with some brats, cigarettes, drinks and weed.

"Sit!" he gestured and offered me a glass full of whisky. He forced me drink it, and I gulped it down in reflex. Though, I vomited it out but a few drops went inside. They were healing indeed. A sudden wave appeased my head. I sipped it again and looked at him, absent mindedly. Whisky took its toll on me.

"See Aarav! I heard of Anamika. I know the whole story and believe me, I was about to contact you because I can't see you like this. I mean, please don't do this to yourself. Life doesn't end. If something has to happen, it will. You can't let things ruin you, getting me?"

I nodded in response.

“So what should I do?” I wonder from where the words came out after so long, and why the hell I was trying to seek help from that bastard.

“Talk to Shanaya, she is dying for you Aarav! She is feeling so low just because of you”, Aniket revealed. “She still likes you. We broke up in a week, she said she couldn’t get over with her feelings for you.”

“Shanaya, but I..”, I tried to speak after fighting a lump in my throat.

I had tears as Aniket held my hand tightly and said, “Shanaya, but I…”.

He stopped me. “Maybe she could help in getting you out of all this. Otherwise I fear about your future Aarav, move on dude! This is life, talk to her!” He had again cast his spell of words on me.

The next day, two of us met in CCD at the Cannought palace.

“Aarav!” Shanaya said as she sat next to me resting her hand on my cheek. It felt good, though it was not like Shona’s touch but definitely something that would distract me.

“Shanaya .. I’m sorry for what happened between us. I mean…” I said in hesitation. I don’t know why I apologized.

“Please Aarav! Don’t discomfit me. I mean it’s okay, forget everything, everything! Let’s start afresh, and please smile now, ” she said.

I smiled forcefully as she grasped my hand. She looked into my teary eyes.

“So? Are you there naa??” she asked, anticipating.

I nodded in response, which she took as yes obviously, though it was not from my heart.

I kept my promise and did everything to get over her. It wasn’t easy though but we both tried together, Shanaya and me.

I was so influenced to move on that I even forgot the poise of my first love. I was going away from her, every next bit and that is what everybody demanded from me. Dad, mom, Vaibhavi and even Shona wished for the same.

I knew it was against dignity of my love but I had to move on. So, I tried my best to do it with brains killing the voice of my heart intentionally at the beginning, and then it became involuntary.

We started meeting a couple of times after that. I and Shanaya got into in a relationship (from her side) and frequent meetings with her somewhere helped me to get a bit out of what happened to me. Anamika’s memories, her words, her smile everything started fading slowly. Though, everyone was happy at home with my changed behavior. I started eating, drinking and talking but had lost my smile, perhaps with a belief that it would come back to me again someday, waiting for life to give me a second chance to smile genuinely.

Someone once said-the incident of losing someone may lead you to two paths. Either you never fall for anyone again or you fall for everyone to get off your loss. And I had been convinced to move on the second one. Anamika's name never left my mind. I forcefully pushed it away, all in vain.

Shanaya started demanding physical things a lot. Congruently, I also started relating with her understanding of LOVE.

I stepped outside the train, it was hazy all around. I could not see anything properly, it seemed like a lot of mist. I looked all around. I saw nothing but an empty railway platform. Suddenly my train whistled to leave. I turned around as I saw Anamika coming towards me out of that fog in the same attire she wore that day. She looked beautiful. Her hair blew with the breeze, she didn't look bothered about her marriage or anything else. She smiled and placed her hand on my cheek. It felt like I was in heaven for few seconds. The same sensation ran all over my body.

"Shona", I screamed.

"*Aarav! See I am happy now. Are you happy?" she said softly.*

"*Yes I am. I always wanted this, just your happiness. No matter if it is because of me or someone else, but where are you … ", I shrugged as she interrupted me.*

"*Leave that, and listen! Now I also want something from you", she asked in her childish manner as she always used to. I nodded in agreement and smiled after months. The haze was not yet bleached away. I looked into her eyes as she uttered in a very mawkish tone, "Aarav, I love you. I love you like no other thing in this world. May be you don't know much about that how I have been through all this without you. I had silly thoughts but your smile always stopped me from doing anything fatuous. Let me not waste much time and let you leave, but promise me one thing. You'll never break down if it's not me around and you will always walk in life with zeal to live and be happy at every stage of your life! I have to leave now, someone's calling me, and yes all the best for your life, LOVE YOU!*"

The haze grew enormous, she got lost somewhere in that smog. I sprinted after her but she left me with a tear.

The alarm clock woke me up with her anklet in my hand. First day of my college.

Everyone was finally happy with me but I was not, with me, with time!

I scribbled on a piece of paper that morning. It was the same paper on which she wrote her number for me.

Guzarta hun aaj bhi jab un galiyon se main,
To waqt kahin ruk sa jata hai,
Dil karta hai kuch masoom sawaal,
Par naa dhadkano se koi jawaab aata hai,
Rukk si jaati hai ye dhadkane bhi waqt ke saath,
Jab jab un lamho ka khayal aata hai.
Dekhta hun aaj bhi main jab unhe vahi apne saath,
Vo nazara hothon par hassi aur aankhon mein chand aansu bhar lata hai
Fir bhi un ashko ki bheed mein ik aansu esa chalak aata hai,
Jinme un yaadon ka gehra aks nazar aata hai,
Dhoondta hai dil unhe, jinke hone se dhoop me bhi hoti thi chaaon,
Intezaar hai to bas itna ke zindagi me vo lamha fir kab laut ke ata hai…

Epilogue

I moved on in life but with her memories alive in my heart and keeping everyone aside in my head.

"This how I became what I am today", I said as I looked around to everyone,

Radhika was full of tears and Mishka too sniffed. Karan and Deb managed to control while Devika was almost asleep in tears though, too much whisky!

"So, how you moved on then? I mean what next?" Mishka asked in a low voice.

"Shanaya you mean?" I asked. As Deb came and sat next to me, keeping his hand across my shoulders.

"Yes!" she said.

"Ahh! We broke up in two months. She got what she wanted, actually she left for Europe to pursue her studies, and as you know it was not the purest form of true love. She told me to break up and all, everything finished in a fraction of time", I yelped.

"Then?" Deb asked this time.

"Then, ummm? Nothing. I went on with college, had a few more relationships. Perhaps I became so selfish that I ruined lives for my advantage. I wanted to be occupied. So, I fell into relationships-for months, weeks, days and few ones for hours also. It is strange but I did that, because I was made to do that. I chose this path unwillingly but moved on the same willingly…may be because it helped me to some extent. I would not say I have forgotten Anamika. To be frank, my love for her has grown since the day she left me! There can be a number of reasons why people leave you, but what they leave in you is something that can never be left." I said fighting a tear.

"Where is Anamika now?" finally Radhika asked something.

"Well, I never talked to anyone about her after all that jazz. So, I don't exactly know her whereabouts but I hope she's happy wherever she is now." I smiled.

Radhika stood up, came towards me and smiled. She hugged me tightly and said "Sorry!"

‘I’m sorry Radhika, you don’t have to be!” I said and smiled back.

“You’re so good Aarav, please don’t spoil yourself, be yourself!” she said while everyone managed to smile on her not-much-required one liner.

“I will!” I said.

I hugged Karan, he was my ‘friend in need-friend indeed’. He took all pains for me. To be precise, he was great. He wasn’t through any of the engineering exams and managed to get admission in the same college.

“You know everything bastard, why are you still awake?” I said to Karan.

“To witness the purest form of love in your eyes!” he uttered and patted my shoulder.

“I’m sorry Aarav, I always misunderstood you!” Deb said.

“You understood me very correctly Deb, the thing is that it was not real me!” I smiled.

Deb, Karan and Radhika left, carrying Devika inside the farmhouse, as she sobbed in sleep.

An unusual night came to a valuable end. I looked at my watch, it was 6:00 am. The sun had risen up with an orange glow at the horizon. It was colder than ever. First morning of the year brought me back, it has to be cool!

Wind breeze still blowing off the bonfire ash, birds muttering, empty vodka bottles lying in indolence and the grass was wet. A typical 1st January you can say, but still a rare one.

“Don’t you think any father would have behaved the same way if he had caught his daughter like that?” Mishka ended the silence abruptly.

“I think yes. In fact, I feel I was wrong in getting carried away by the moment. I mean, I don’t object against any such deeds in relationships, but we could have thought about the situations around us. It was a goddamn parking lot of the banquet of her brother’s marriage.” I answered, frustrated with myself.

“Hmm, maybe. But her father too kept his first priority as the society. He completely neglected his daughter, her needs, his family and everything. He could have tried to accept things in a better way. He could have at least reduced the intensity of suffering brought to you both and their family as well.” Mishka added, blaming the society for its petty role in the lives of people.

A thought struck me.

“I want to write this Mishka”, I said taking a deep breath, coalescing an empty beer bottle on the table.

“What? About what? Exactly”, she questioned, bending towards me.

“Ummm .. About what all happened last night”, I smiled.

“Are you nuts? What was so special in last night that you want to write about it”, she leered.

“I mean what I realized last night.”

"Elaborate dude..how do I know about your realizations?" "I mean..see, my first encounter with love left me insane. I just got into believing that love is the terrible thing that will make me suffer. I only focused on the dark side of the story, did I ever try to feel the love around me? NO, I didn't. I indulged into the worst of accomplishments, maybe peer pressure was one of the reasons. But I accepted and followed it blindly…I never gave my life a chance. I never learnt from it."

Mishka had an impish glint in her eyes as I continued.

"Love not only brought me pain and swollen eyes, it gave me moments to cherish for a lifetime. Cursing my life for past experiences was the easy way out… I took it like a coward. I didn't come out of it. I held it with me for long. I didn't forgive my life, I didn't let it go. Things could have been better, I could have made them better, only myself. No one else could. Love is not an easy affair. But it, undoubtedly, is the most beautiful feeling of the world."

"Ahann, love guru", Mishka nudged me and winked at me.

"It is not just about love yaar! In any aspect of our life, we do the same. Don't you think? One bad experience and we bar ourselves from trying again. We don't try, we don't leave it, we don't live. We encage the spontaneity of our life. We fear the thing that brought us disappointment."

"My god! You are full of philosophical shit! But this sounds like a universal truth." She gave a grave look.

"Yeah bitch, random thoughts…I might become a babaa some day." I unfolded the collar of my shirt.

Mishka threw a stone at me.

"But seriously man, I agree. We do forget that life has its own ways of teaching us its lessons. Hope the message this story gave us would definitely inspire people to take life positively and a bit less seriously. Bad moments come complimentary with good ones, and this is how Life GOES ON!"

"Ahaan, I am contagious." I added as we high-fived.

"So when we are meeting up next", I said.

"Whenever you want!" she said.

"Akhon thekei shuru kori, bhokae!" I said and winked at her.

"What?" she widened her eyes as we both chuckled!

... I Love you Rachu ...

Dear Frnds pls spread this msg until its reach to my rachu
I think see knows my name
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